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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

APRIL, 1955

35¢

HUNTING LICENSE

by

James V. McConnell



Introducing the

AUTHOR



★
James V. McConnell
★

My full name is James Vernon McConnell. Statistics: 29 years old, stretching for 30, am 6'2" tall, weigh about 180 pounds in a strong breeze, and for reasons known only to the fairer sex am still single. I was born in Oklahoma, reared in Louisiana, but for reasons which escape me at the moment like to think of myself as a Texan. From all of this you can easily understand that I now live in Oslo, Norway.

Somewhere along the line, while not spending several years in radio and television, I managed to pick up a couple of degrees in psychology. It took me seven different universities to do this, but I finally made it. I am now working diligently on the third degree, and so, quite naturally, had to find yet another school. When I mentioned this desire to continue my education to one of my professors in the States, he told me politely to go to

Hell. Well, I looked Hell up on the map, and found it was a little Norwegian town about 400 km. from the University of Oslo. So here I am. I hope this is as close as I get.

I like: dogs, cats, the smell of fresh-baked bread coming from a bakery or the fine air-borne scent of talcum powders and hair lotions you get when you walk past a barber shop, French cooking, a good bull session, mental puzzles, acting, watching football games, mathematics, classical music, smoking, traveling by air, the taste of broiled lobster, parts of psychology, the feel of wet sand on my bare feet, sleeping till noon or later, warm weather, and the fresh, healthy look of Norwegian women.

I dislike: spinach and brussell sprouts, the sound of metal scraping on cement, hillbilly music, Mickey Spillane's novels, scorpions, snakes of any poisonous kind in-
(Concluded on Page 87)

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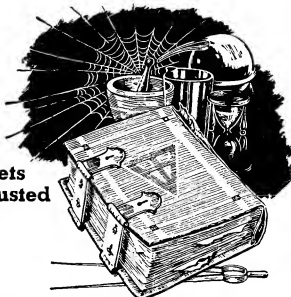
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The Editorial

It's always a pleasure to try something new and have it meet with enthusiastic approval. You will recall that we inaugurated what has been since called the "New Look" in science fiction with the December 1954 cover. Frankly, we had our fingers crossed, since we were delving into a type of cover art that mingled science fiction, pinup, and a fair shake of sophistication. Also quite frankly, with any other artist but McCauley the idea might not have properly jelled. However, the artist is McCauley, and the new look is going over with a bang. (That's us clapping our editorial palms!)

Now that we're aware that you not only approve but are in the majority enthusiastic about the new look, we're happy to say it's here to stay. And also, your editors and McCauley have some interesting ideas on the fire for future covers. So thanks for the applause, and you'll be pleasantly surprised as we go along. (Like this month's cover? Let us know.)

Last month we presented an open letter by our book reviewer, Henry Bott, in reply to an article by Isaac Asimov, in which Isaac took issue with Bott's reviews in *Madge*. We offered Mr. Asimov an opportunity to reply this month, if he so chose. He did. Forthwith, Isaac Asimov's open letter to IMA-

GINATION:

It seems that Henry Bott annoyed me with some of the things he said about me in his reviews which I thought were unfair and uncalled for. It seems also that I have annoyed him with some of the things I said in return. Well, that sort of thing can go on forever without much profit to anyone.

Instead I would like to return a soft answer. In fact, I would like to praise Henry Bott and point out that despite my own sour thoughts about him, he can indeed write a fair review. I am not too proud or stubborn to admit I was wrong in that respect and to apologize for that.

To make my point clearer, I would like to specify the review I mean and point out just why I think it is fair and decent.

On page 122 of the February 1955 issue of IMAGINATION, Mr. Bott reviews a book called LUCKY STARR AND THE OCEANS OF VENUS, by one Paul French.

Now Mr. Bott is not so crazy-wild about the book. He doesn't give it a rave review. He explains that in his opinion it is a juvenile which is suitable only for beginners in the field. He also expresses the thought that the book is not as good as juveniles written by authors such as Heinlein.

Still, despite this, he is careful to point out that he thinks it "is

far superior to the comic strip science fiction pattern," that it "is entertainment in its way and it won't upset anyone." He also says that Paul French shows "inventiveness and a richness of imagination," and that "he could produce a superior piece of work if he could pay more attention to detail."

I am sure that Mr. French, on reading this review, would feel quite good about the kind words and would feel no rancor at all about the eminently fair criticism. In fact, I am sure he would say that he does his best to make his juveniles as good as Mr. Heinlein's, and that perhaps he will improve as he continues to try. He would also ask Mr. Bott to feel free—if he ever has the time—to give him examples of just where he has fallen short in matters of detail. Mr. French would explain that he learned a great deal from helpful reviewers and editors in the past and hopes to continue learning in the future.

I am positive that Mr. French would say all this. The reason I am positive is that Paul French and Isaac Asimov are the same person.

I feel certain that Mr. Bott knew this rather open secret and, under the circumstances, his review is all the more kind and fair.

I am very happy that Mr. Bott does not dislike my work quite as much as he himself seemed to think he did in last month's editorial. I certainly find that I, myself, do not dislike his work quite as much as I had thought I did.

I shall continue to write as well as I can and I feel sure that Mr.

Bott will continue to review books in this excellent combination of calmness and dignity, even when he doesn't like the book.

—Isaac Asimov

We're pleased to publish this conciliatory letter, with the knowledge that peace now reigns among all concerned. To give credit where it is due, Henry Bott, of course knew that Paul French was an Asimov *nom de plume*. Matter of fact, we (blushingly admitted) edited out a paragraph of the review containing a reference to this fact, because the review had to fit an allotted space. At any rate, it's nice to know that Hank's fairly favorable review spread enough balm into Gilead to still the troubled waters. See you next month

. wll



"You answer it!"

HUNTING LICENSE

by

James V. McConnell

Trophies from a big game hunt were highly prized. So naturally Karsten and Thurman wanted their guide to find a really choice criminal . . .

THE helicopters buzzed lazily overhead like fat flies in a warm May wind.

"There they go. Right on time," said William Karsten III. His hunting jacket shone bright red in the early morning sun as he moved out into the open to watch the planes.

"I do hope that they don't get airsick," replied Thomas Thurman from his comfortable chair in front of the fire. He took a long stick and began poking the embers closer to the coffee container.

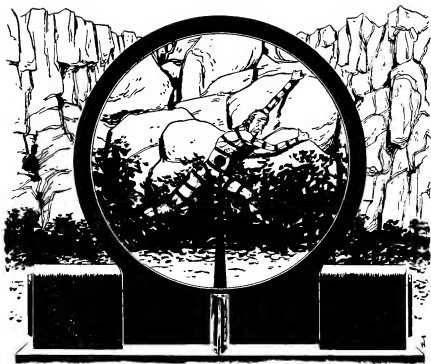
William Karsten turned around and looked at his companion. "Why in heaven's name should you be so concerned about *them*?" he asked. The early morning light on his brown-and-gray hair gave it a more youthful appearance than it usually had.

"They don't hunt very well when

they're sick," said Thurman. "And that of course, is my only concern for them." He smiled at his hunting partner, then motioned him over to the fire. "Have a cup of coffee while we're waiting."

Karsten walked over to the center of the little forest clearing where they had built the fire. "Might as well have a cup, I guess," he said. His face, furrowed with deep lines that had taken half a life-time to create, wore a slight frown. "But I wish that Emmett would get back. What's the sense of hiring a hunting guide if he's not around to take care of things for you? I'm getting hungry."

Thurman laughed at him. "If you'd worry more about where we're going to hunt instead of spending all your time thinking about your stomach, we'd probably



have better luck," he said. He poured a cup of sweet brown coffee for both of them, then passed one of the cups to Karsten. "Emmett probably couldn't get the Warden on the phone right away." Thurman, who had once been something of an athlete, began to laugh, his heavy-set body shaking gently with the expressed mirth. "If the worst comes to the worst, Bill, we *could* fix our own breakfast, you know."

Karsten uttered a sigh. "Hunting just isn't what it used to be. Some-

times I wonder why I bother to come out at all." He settled down comfortably on a collapsible chair and looked around him. He could just see the top of a tall metal fence a few hundred yards away—the stout circle of steel that engirdled the Game Preserve, cutting it off from the rest of the world.

"You come hunting for the same reason that I do, Bill Karsten. Because you love the thrill of the sport," Thurman told him. "Because there's nothing like it in the

world—the bright open air, the smell of a green forest, and the pleasure of pitting yourself against the hunted. That's why you come hunting."

Karsten shrugged. "I suppose you're right, but—" He stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by the sound of trampled underbrush. "Oh, here's Emmett back."

EMMETT Packer, registered hunting guide, came from behind a clump of bushes into the little clearing in the woods. His bright yellow hunting jacket reflected a dazzling pattern of sunlight and shadows in striking contrast to the man's weathered complexion and dark black hair. He waved a muscular arm at his employers.

"Sorry I took so long, boys," he said, walking towards them. "But I had trouble getting the Warden on the car telephone. The line was busy." Emmett poured himself a cup of coffee. "But I finally got ahold of him, and he'll be along in a little while. And the horses are all lined up for us at the Gate. So we shouldn't have any trouble at all."

"Good," said Thurman.

Emmett smiled, "And now, I suppose you boys would like a little breakfast?" Emmett said it not quite as a question, but more as an

assertion of a known fact.

"Of course, of course," said Karsten. "I'm starving. Got to have energy to hunt, you know." He smiled jovially.

Emmett set about opening canisters and boxes in preparation of the meal. Thurman and Karsten leaned back in their comfortable chairs and stared at the scenery. Overhead one last helicopter droned by. In the tall forest grass a cricket chirped angrily.

"How would you like your steaks?" asked Emmett.

"Medium," said Thurman.

"A little on the rare side, if you can manage it," said Karsten. "And no onions for me. They give me indigestion." He glanced nervously at his watch. "I wonder if I'll have time to call the office before the Warden gets here?"

Tom Thurman smiled. "Relax," he said. "Your office can take care of itself for a change."

"Well, I guess it can, but—"

"Then why worry about it," said Thurman. "Forget it. Make the most of your vacation. After all, it isn't every day in the year that you come hunting humans, you know."

Shrugging his shoulders for an answer, William Karsten relaxed again. The aroma of the cooking meat permeated the morning breeze, mingling with the subtler

smells of pine and warm rich earth. In the nearby trees birds sang out loud.

"Wonder how many we'll get this year?" asked Thurman after a while.

Emmett looked up from his chores. "If you boys will just follow my directions, you'll get the limit." He smiled proudly. "My hunters *always* come back with the limit. You know that."

Karsten harrumphed. "I saw some of the sorry specimens you dug up for the Kilpatricks last year. And I must say," he continued, "They were the poorest excuses for human beings I've ever seen."

Emmett frowned and started to answer, but Thurman spoke first. "That reminds me, Bill. If we bring back any bodies this year, Martha says we'll have to wrap them up first."

"What's the matter with Martha?" asked Karsten. "She doesn't really object to the sight of naked bodies lashed to the front fenders of your car, does she?"

With a laugh, Thomas Thurman said, "No. Martha doesn't object to our displaying the spoils of the hunt. But she says that last year the blood spoiled the finish of the car. And I don't want to have it repainted again this year." He sighed softly. "Just one of her

whims, I guess."

"Breakfast is ready," said Emmett.

THE high-pitched whine of rotor blades interrupted their meal. The three men watched the bright blue helicopter drop slowly out of the sky and come to a gentle landing at one edge of the clearing. Once the plane's engine had stopped and the blades were no longer twirling, the door to the air-craft opened and out stepped a rotund figure dressed in a uniform the same sky-blue color as that of the plane. He bounced, more than walked, towards the seated trio.

"Good day! Good day, gentlemen!" the Warden called out as soon as he was within earshot. "Oh, please don't get up on my account."

Thurman motioned with one hand. "Have a seat, Warden. We're glad to see you."

The Warden plopped his pudgy body down in one of the chairs. "Thank you," he said, his voice as round and as jolly as his appearance. "Having breakfast, I see." He waved a hand "Oh, please don't offer me anything to eat. I'm on a diet again." He sighed.

Emmett rose to get the papers that the officer would want to see. "How's the crop this year, Warden?" he asked.

A frown crossed the fat man's face. "Fair. Just fair," he said. "I can't understand it, really. A few years ago there were so many of them." His face brightened a bit. "But, then, there's still enough to go around, and that's the important thing. And, on the other hand, I suppose that we ought to be happy—from the sociological point of view, of course—that there just aren't as many criminals in our society today as there used to be. It speaks well for us, don't you think?"

William Karsten III made a slight noise with his tongue. "But it ruins the hunting. You can't have a hunt unless you've got criminals to hunt for." He turned to his companion. "You see, Tom," he said. "I told you that it wouldn't be too good this year."

"I wonder what's wrong with things nowadays that there just aren't enough criminals?" mused Thurman.

Emmett returned with the proper papers and handed them to the Warden. The fat little man looked them over carefully, then handed them back to the guide with a wave of his hand. "They look in excellent order," he told Emmett. He turned to the hunters. "You have a good man here in Emmett," he told them. Emmett favored the officer with a smile.

Reaching inside his jacket, the Warden extracted a little box and handed it to Emmett. "Here are the supersonic whistles, gentlemen, and the crystals for your ear plugs so that you can hear them. Just be sure to use them. Remember the first time you sight a quarry, give one long toot on the whistle. If you hear nothing in your ear plugs, he's yours to track down. But if you hear three short toots in answer, that means that someone else beat you to him." The officer wagged a finger at the two hunters. "And let's have no mistakes and no arguments, like we have had in the past. Just follow the rules—blow your whistles correctly—and everyone will have a fair chance at the game."

Emmett fitted the slim crystals into the ear plugs. "They look a little different this year," he said.

"Oh, yes," the Warden told him. "We had to go much higher up on the supersonic scale this time since we discovered that one of the quarries last year could hear up to 22,000 cycles." He smiled jovially. "Can't have the hunted hearing the whistles when they're being tracked down, you know."

Karsten wiped his lips with a napkin and then handed his empty plate to the guide. "Any new rules this year, Warden?" he asked.

"No, I think the only new thing

we have this year is that hunting jacket of yours, Mr. Karsten. It is new, isn't it?"

Karsten beamed. "Why, yes it is. Latest style, I think." He raised his arms to display the brilliant red garment the better. "It's a new kind of material. Guaranteed to be seen for half a mile, even at night." He lowered his arms, then patted one of the chest pockets. "But the best thing is that it's got a self-contained heating-cooling system built right in. All you have to do is to turn the dial and you get whatever weather you want."

THE Warden looked impressed. "My," he said. "What won't they think of next." He smiled again. "I imagine that the people you're going to be hunting would give a pretty penny for one of those today. The weather man says it's going to be a bit chilly tonight."

Thurman lit a cigarette. "I guess it is rather hard on them, being dumped in the middle of the Preserve completely naked, so to speak." He sighed. "But then, they're criminals, after all."

"That's right," said Karsten. "And remember, they've got their paint to keep them warm," he added, laughing.

The Warden snapped his fingers. "I'm glad you reminded me, Mr.

Karsten. The paint is a little different this year."

Karsten looked surprised. "They haven't changed the signals, have they?" he demanded.

"Oh, no," said the Warden. "Black stripes painted all around the body still mean he's an ordinary criminal, black and red alternating stripes mean crimes of passion, and all red stripes used for the subversives, of course. Just like always."

Coughing discretely, the Warden continued. "What I meant was that after the complaints we got last year we decided to use a *really* indelible paint so that not even a skilled surgeon could get it off."

"Complaints?" asked Thurman.

The warden gave a gigantic sigh. "That's right. It seems that some of the hunters—not people like you, mind—but some of them have been altering the color of the stripes after they've bagged their game." He smiled. "And we can't have that, you know. It just isn't sporting. When you display your trophies, you want all the glory that's coming to you. *But* no more than you actually deserve."

Putting his hands on the arms of the chair, the Warden made a valiant effort and managed, just barely, to remove his body from the comforting confines of the chair. "Well," he said, "I must be off."

Have a lot of other hunters to see before the season opens." The two hunters rose and shook hands with him.

"Now, let's synchronize our watches before I leave," the officer said. He peered closely at his time-piece. "It's now 7:23:05 by my official clock. I got word on my plane radio just as I was landing that the criminals were dropped in the center of the Preserve at 7:03 exactly." He looked up. "The season opens at ten sharp. I'll see you at the Gate before then, of course." He turned around and bounced towards the plane. Before shutting the door to the air-craft, he gave them a final wave of his hand.

"Good hunting," he called.

A little past ten the three men were riding their horses across the gentle plain that led to the mountains in the center of the Preserve. They had passed through the gates with scores of other hunters the moment the season was officially opened.

"Emmett," said Thurman, jogging along on his large horse. "Are you still going to insist on taking us down to that little pass first of all?"

Emmett reined his horse in between the mounts ridden by the two hunters. "Well, I don't want to seem pig-headed about it, boys,"

he told them. "But that's where I think the hunting will be best this time of day."

"Nonsense," Karsten told him. "I was talking to Morris Overman about it just last week. And he said he had his best luck over by that big waterfall—you know the one, Emmett. It has lots of trees around it."

Emmett raised his eyebrows, as if in disdain, "Oh, I know the one, all right. And Mr. Overman is a pretty lucky hunter, too. But I think—"

Thurman interrupted him. "If you want *my* opinion," he said, "We'll do well to try it down in that little valley just the other side of the Leaning Stone." He waved a magazine at them. "There's an article on the criminal mind in the latest issue of *Hunter's Scientific Monthly* by E. C. Stewart. He says that criminals always favor depressions, and that ought to mean valleys too."

Frowning, Emmett replied, "Well, Stewart ought to know. He's a psychologist, after all. But I must remind you that my services are guaranteed only if you follow my directions. If you do like I tell you, I promise that both of you boys will come back with at least one trophy. Why, I even signed a contract to that effect with you."

"We know all that," Karsten told him.

"But if you insist on striking off on your own, the guarantee doesn't hold." Emmett paused a moment, as if for effect, then continued.

"Now, look, boys," he said. "Doesn't it make sense, really, that since hunting is my job, I'd know where the big ones are? I don't mean to knock anyone else, but this *is* my business, you know, and I've been at it for a good many years now. So you boys just stick with me, and you won't come back empty-handed."

The two hunters made no reply, but Emmett could see that they weren't entirely satisfied. They rode along in silence for several moments. Then Emmett said to them in a confidential tone of voice, "Frankly, boys, I didn't want to tell you this, because we guides like to keep our trade secrets to ourselves. But last year, the man I was guiding and I went to this little pass I'm taking you to, see, and we came up with a whopper."

"Really?" said Thurman, showing some interest.

"He must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds—at least. One of the biggest criminals I've ever seen. A magnificent creature," Emmett told them.

"You don't say," said Karsten. "Who got him?"

Emmett smiled. "A Mr. Thomp-

son, down from the northern part of the district. The body was so big that Thompson had it skinned and tanned, and made a really nice-looking rug out of it. He sent me a picture to show me."

Thurman's eyes were wide with delight. "Amazing," he said.

"As for myself," commented Karsten. "I don't hold with this rug business. They're all right, I guess, for those who like them. But they get torn up so easily. Human beings just aren't thick skinned enough, I suppose."

"Two hundred and fifty pounds," mused Thurman out loud.

"If he weighed an ounce," Emmett said. "You don't get many that size, you know." He looked at the two hunters, then smiled securely. "So shall we just follow my lead and head for the pass first thing?"

"All right with me," Thurman said.

"Me, too," said Karsten. He belched loudly, then rubbed his stomach gently. "I think I ate too much for breakfast," he said.

THE way to the little pass led up over the crest of one of the smaller mountains. The three men jogged along at an even pace over the level ground, but traveled more slowly up the steep facing of the mountainside. The two hunters

often complained about the heat and the terrain as they rode. Emmett said little except when he urged them to hurry along.

The sun was high in the sky, just past the zenith, when the trio came down the side of a small cliff and out through a little pass onto an open space of ground.

Emmett pulled up his horse and dismounted. "Well, boys," he said. "Let's get off here for a while." The other two dismounted and handed their animals over to the guide.

"Looks like a fairly good spot," said Thurman. Emmett tethered the horses quickly and then began unpacking some of the equipment. He put up the collapsible chairs in the cooling shade of a single tree that stood near the center of the little clearing. Then he placed some of the boxes containing food around the chairs and handed the two hunters their guns.

"If you boys will make yourselves comfortable, I'll go out and scout around for something to shoot at," he told them.

Karsten settled down into one of the chairs with an audible sigh of relief. Thurman gave his gun a casual inspection. "All right," he said to the guide. "Go ahead. And see if you can find something worth while."

Emmett tucked his rifle under

his arm and headed off into the dense underbrush.

"Have something to eat," Karsten said, passing an open box to his companion.

Thurman helped himself to the food, then leaned back in his chair. "I don't mind saying that I hope Emmett will come up with a good-sized one right off," he said.

"You know what I'd like?" Karsten said through a mouthful of food. "I wish he'd find me a real red-head. That's all I really need to give my collection balance." He waved a chicken leg at Thurman. "If it were a good-sized head, I'd hang it right in the center over the mantelpiece. I could surround it with heads that have dark hair and make quite an attractive pattern. My wife goes in for color schemes, you know."

Tom Thurman sighed. The day was dry and he could feel the drowsy heat of the sun even in the pleasant shade of the large tree. He began to fan himself with his hand. "I understand the latest fad is to have the whole body stuffed and mounted on a plaque before you hang it up on the wall," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I'm just old fashioned," he continued, "but it seems to me that they would take up an awful lot of room if you did that."

A tiny gnat began to pester Kar-

sten as he ate. He brushed it aside several times, but it always returned to whine annoyingly around his face. "Well," Karsten said, "there's precedent for it. Remember how excited old Morrie was the first time he bagged a two hundred pounder?" Karsten guffawed. "He was so damn proud he kept the whole body and tucked it away in his freezer. Used to pull it out to show to people when he gave a party." Sighing in reminiscence, he continued. "Had to give it up after a while, though. He thawed it out so many times that it began to spoil." He slapped violently at the gnat.

Thurman opened his canteen and began sipping at the cool liquid inside. He was about to light a cigarette when he saw Emmett returning.

"Here comes Emmett," he said excitedly to Karsten. "Maybe he's made contact!"

Karsten got up from his chair heavily, "He's smiling; I'll bet he found us a good one!" He reached for his gun.

Emmett walked up to the two hunters quickly. "Well, boys, you're in," he said, grinning broadly. "I found one, just like I told you I would."

"Where?" asked Thurman quickly.

"Down this little path here,

about a quarter of a mile. He's hiding in a kind of thicket, but you won't have any trouble spotting him. The sun's bright there, and you can see the white of his body clearly." He paused to give them a superior grin. "And I don't think he knew that I'd spotted him."

"You stay here and look after the horses," Thurman told the guide. "We'll signal you at the kill."

THE two hunters walked quickly down the path under the refreshing shade of the forest. Both of them were excited and they tended occasionally to stumble over tree roots and dead branches as they went.

"He must be just down the way there," Karsten whispered hoarsely after they had gone for some distance into the woods.

"Shush," whispered Thurman, attempting to quiet his companion.

The path made a slight turn just beyond them, and when they had rounded it, they saw a thick clump of bushes ahead. Through the green-and-brown pattern of the leaves they could see brief patches of pale white.

"That's it," whispered Karsten. Thurman nodded and pulled out his whistle. He gave a long, silent blast on it that he could hear only

as a sharp rasping noise from the tiny plug he wore in one ear.

The two hunters stood quietly, waiting, their faces filled with expectation. After a few brief moments, Thurman turned to his hunting partner. "No answer. We must have spotted him first."

"Good," said Karsten. "Let's go get him."

They had no more than started towards their quarry when they saw a sudden movement in the bushes. The white patches disappeared, and they could hear the sound of running feet.

"Damn!" said Karsten loudly. "He must have heard us."

Thurman smiled. "It's better this way, Bill. I rather like tracking them down. Don't you?"

"Well, it's kind of a bother, as far as I'm concerned. Especially so soon after eating," Karsten said. But he followed quickly behind as Thurman set off in pursuit.

The forest was too thick for a man to run with any real speed, so the hunters managed to stay close behind their quarry without expending too much energy.

"I wonder what he looked like," Karsten said they pushed their way through the thick underbrush. "I didn't get a good look at him."

"Neither did I," Thurman replied, grabbing hold of a vine to pull himself over a dead tree that

stood in their path. "I hope he isn't just an ordinary criminal. I've got enough black stripes at home as it is."

"Look out!" Karsten cried suddenly. "He's doubling back on us!"

The two men turned rapidly and set off in a new direction, attempting to head off their quarry before he could make his way to open ground. They managed to get in between him and the edge of the woods and were rewarded by seeing a brief ripple of white as the naked man turned and started back towards the center of the little forest.

"Good work," said Thurman.

Most of the time they tracked him simply by listening to the directions the noise of his running came from. Often they were close enough at his heels to get a quick glimpse of flesh in the distance—an arm, a leg, or part of his back. They got their first good look at him when they came out from behind a rock into a little clearing. The quarry was just disappearing into the forest on the other side of the open space.

"Red stripes!" cried Karsten as they rushed across the clearing. "He's a subversive; Now, that is luck."

"Looks awfully small to me," said Thurman, "whatever he is."

"Damn. You don't suppose it could be a woman, do you?" Kar-

sten asked somewhat breathlessly. "We only got a glimpse of it."

"I hope not. Supposed to be bad luck to shoot a woman first thing on a hunt, you know," Thurman replied as they reached the far side of the clearing. "Anyway, we'll soon know."

They plunged into the heavy forest only a few hundred yards behind their game. Following rapidly along behind him, they left a wake of broken branches and torn limbs as they went. The forest rang with the sounds of the chase.

Soon, sloshing across a little stream, they came up over a grassy knoll and down into a shallow glade on the other side of it.

"He's heading for the rocks, over that way," Thurman said, turning off in pursuit. "He won't be able to go much farther."

"I don't know if I'll be able to go much farther," said Karsten. the perspiration beading out across his heavy face. "I'm not used to this."

"Neither is he," Thurman reminded him. "Remember, he's had nothing to eat for almost a week, and they probably didn't let him sleep for three or four days back. He can't last much longer."

"I hope not," said Karsten. ,

They passed across a narrow strip of marsh land, carefully avoiding most of the bog holes as they went. Just on the other side,

as they came around a series of heavy berry bushes, they heard a long, shrill buzz from their ear plugs.

Thurman stopped quickly. "Somebody else has spotted him!" he said, and took out his whistle. He gave it three lusty blasts and then stuck it back in his pocket. "That should fix them," he told his partner. They set off again in pursuit.

Soon it became obvious to the two hunters that they were gaining rapidly on their quarry. They increased their pace just a trifle to take advantage of their lead.

IT was perhaps five minutes later when they tracked their man down and for the first time got a good look at him. They were very close to the outcroppings of a rather steep foothill when they came over a little rise and saw him scarcely a thousand yards in front of them.

"There he goes!" cried Karsten. "Into that little pass between those two rocks!" Rapidly they closed in upon the narrow pass.

The opening between the big rocks was not much more than ten feet wide. It led like a narrow corridor through the sides of the hill and then opened up beyond into a little canyon. The two hunters paused just on the other side of the

pass.

"I think he's trapped," said Thurman. "I can't tell for sure, because there are too many bushes in the way. But I think this is a little box canyon, and that this pass is the only way out."

William Karsten looked around him. "Seems that way to me," he told his companion. "Let's move on in slowly."

They took their time as they walked through the narrow canyon, checking behind each bush and rock as they went. The little valley was only a hundred yards wide but several hundred yards in length. On all sides rose a sheer cliff some fifty feet in height.

When they were about two hundred yards from the end of the canyon, they stopped. The cliff walls had narrowed so that there was scarcely a twenty-five yard distance from one side to the other. Only one last row of bushes separated the hunters from their quarry.

"I can see him from here," Karsten said. "He's up against the back of the canyon there, trying to hide."

"Well, this is ft," Thurman said. "It's a pity he's such a small-sized one."

"Well," asked Karsten. "Shall we flip a coin?"

"Why not?" said Thurman. He

reached in his pocket. "Call it," he said.

"Heads," Karsten answered.

Thomas Thurman tossed the coin high into the air. Its silver sides caught brightly at the sunlight as it mounted in a smooth arc, then danced back to earth. The two men leaned over to inspect it.

"Heads it is," Karsten said, grinning. "I win."

"This is your day, I guess," Thurman told him.

Karsten moved forward to the clump of bushes, Thurman following close behind. They could see the quarry clearly now, the whiteness of his body in bold contrast with the thick red stripes.

"He has gray hair," Thurman said.

The criminal inched back along the rocky wall, seeking desperately for some exit. He tried to climb up the side of the cliff, but could do no more than to stir up a small shower of loose stones as he lost his footing. Suddenly he picked up a rock, twirled, and threw it at the hunters. It scarcely covered a third of the ground between them.

"Well, I like that," said Karsten. "He's got his nerve." He raised his rifle to his shoulder and looked carefully through the telescopic sight. For several moments he held his stance. Then slowly he lowered the gun back to his side.

"I'm sorry, Tom," he said. "But I think I'll let you have this one after all."

Thurman looked surprised. "What's the matter, Bill?" he asked.

William Karsten sighed. "I think I used to know him."

"Oh," Thurman said. And then he frowned. "You're sure it's not just because he's so small that you're giving him up?" he questioned.

"No. Quite sure. I think he was one of my professors back in college."

"Oh, well, then," Thurman said. He put his gun to his shoulder and took careful aim.

"Shoot for the body, Tom," Karsten whispered to him. "Don't want to spoil the head."

Thurman pulled the trigger. The explosion split the quiet air apart and cast the pieces of silence as echoes up and down the little canyon.

"GOOD shot!" Karsten told his companion. "Nice and clean."

Thurman smiled. "Thank you," he said. And then, "Too bad you had to give him up."

Shrugging his shoulders, Karsten said, "Well, that's the way of things. I don't remember him too well, but I think he taught me an-

thropology. Old Mac something-or-other. I forget his name."

The two men started walking back towards the entrance to the canyon. "I suppose that I could have taken him anyway," Karsten said as they walked. "But I've never considered it good taste to shoot someone whom I've known."

"I know how you feel," Thurman told him.

"It sort of . . . well . . . ruins the sport, if you know what I mean," Karsten said.

"Sure," replied Thurman.

They went quietly through the narrow little pass, stopping on the other side. Thurman lit a cigarette and leaned back against a rock to rest. Karsten put a star shell into his rifle, pointed it towards the sky, and fired. They both watched as it burst into a gaudy blossom of fire and smoke far above them.

"That ought to bring Emmett on the run," Karsten said. "He can clean things up and leave a marker. The plane will pick up the body later today."

Thurman took a deep breath. The air had a tangy smell to it of springtime grass and early flowers. The warmth of the sun gave the forest a hazy sort of glow. In the nearby trees small animals chattered loudly.

"Nice day, isn't it, Bill?"

"It certainly is," Karsten ans-

wered, gazing thoughtfully at the pleasant landscape. "But look at those clouds. It might rain tonight."

"It might at that," Thurman told him. He gave another sigh and

then smiled, dropping his cigar to the ground and crushing it out beneath his boot.

"Well, shall we go?" he asked. "I'm getting hungry."

THE END

★ *Amateurs & Rockets . . .* ★

THERE is no calling in science or engineering that does not have its full quota of enthusiastic amateurs. These are amateur radiomen, amateur astronomers, amateur everything-elses and the latest to join the ranks are the amateur rocketmen! Nor are these rocket enthusiasts to be confused with the sedentary rocket "associations." These newcomers not only build rockets, they fly them and their testing grounds are a perfect miniature of White Sands where the big V-2's go off.

The Pacific Rocket Society and the Reaction Research Society are two fast growing organizations whose members are students, engineers and physicists who have been bitten by that irresistible bug to see sleek cylinders of metal roaring off into the sky. The rocket "meets" which occur several times a year carry all the color and flavor of a genuine scientific meeting spiked by the indescribable atmosphere of excitement which accompanies the firing of any kind of a rocket, including a Chinese skyrocket.

But these amateurs do not play with fireworks. Their rockets are perfect miniaturizations of solid and liquid fueled rockets, fired

from launching cradles and born in endless hours of paperwork design and research.

Most of the rockets are propelled by powders—solid propellants being much simpler than liquid-fueled rocket motors—but there have been a number of launchings of two-stage liquid-fueled rockets which have reached altitudes of as much as four miles.

The work of these amateurs is a definite contribution to science. Tremendous amounts of information on the behavior of rockets is garnered from these desert flights. The ultimate aim of all this is what you'd expect. The amateurs see a possibility of their work ending in an unmanned Lunar flight through a seven stage rocket. Their studies toward this end stand a good chance of success for they apply the latest techniques of control.

When you remember that the amateur efforts of the German Rocket Society finally ended in the tremendous accomplishment of the V-2, you can't help but feel that the work these people are doing also stands a good chance of at least stimulating the supreme effort of putting some kind of projectile on the Moon!

★ Static From The Stars ★

RADIO astronomy is supplanting cosmogony as a major interest of modern astronomers. The fact that most stars are effectively gigantic radio transmitters (including our Sun) has galvanized astronomers into investigating this fairly recent discovery.

There are now being built, in America, England and Australia, huge radio telescopes, whose physical dimensions are measured in hundreds of feet. These "radio-scopes" are comparatively simple affairs, essentially enlarged versions of the ordinary radar "dish" antenna.

These huge parabaloids inter-

cept the feeble radio whispers from the stars and concentrate them into detectable roars. Like the spectroscope, the radioscope adds a new dimension to astronomy delivering information of vital value to Ter-ran physics and chemistry.

Each star emits very short radio waves, micro-waves, which when analyzed, offer a good deal of information on the constitution of the star, its radiation processes, and the basic nature of the atomic furnace which every star is. For astronomical news of the future, watch the science of radio-astronomy . . . it has quite a few volumes to tell!



Highways In Hiding

by

George O. Smith

Mekstrom's Disease had proven fatal to all its victims; yet paradoxically Steve Cornell knew there were hidden survivors—each one a superman!

Four Part Serial — Part II

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the century ahead Earth has bridged interplanetary space although widespread colonization to other planets is still in the development stage. Mankind itself has undergone a change; two additional senses have been developed in certain individuals, making them either espers or telepaths. Those possessing either of these characteristics are naturally drawn into the higher levels of society — the governing levels, and creative groups.

In this advanced society the Medical Group, headed by advanced espertelepaths known as Scholars, are the main governing body. This fact is not common knowledge, however, as the main body of the world's populace are normal—in the sense that as individuals they are neither telepaths nor espers—and the Scholars seek power behind the throne of government.

Body repair has become almost miraculous, with disease wiped out to all intents and purposes, with

one exception: a rare and sinister disease which is always fatal, turning the body slowly to stone-like substance, killing as vital organs are reached. This disease is known as Mekstrom's Disease since it was brought to Earth—supposedly—by one of the early space voyagers, a man named Otto Mekstrom, who himself succumbed. The Medical Centers are stymied on a cure, with the Scholars endeavoring to keep notoriety to a minimum, at the same time insisting that all cases report for treatment.

As story opens, Steve Cornell, an esper, and his fiancée, Catherine, a telepath, are eloping. On the highway Steve's car crashes into a tree blocking the road. He awakens in a hospital, his first concern for Catherine.

He is told there is no Catherine listed as a patient. Further, there was no one else in the car accident. Cornell knows this is not true, since he distinctly remembers Catherine calling his attention to a strange highway sign a moment



before the crash. He had used his esper to dig the sign behind them, thus not being aware of the obstruction ahead. But the authorities are adamant. He is told a farmer and his son—the Hendersons—pulled him from the wreck. All records indicate Cornell is suffering traumatic shock.

Cornell leaves the hospital with one purpose. To find his fiancée. He visits the Henderson farm but finds nothing to contradict the hospital account. Later, on returning to the farm, he finds the Hendersons gone, with no forwarding address. Also, a doctor Thorndyke at the hospital has vanished.

The queer highway sign responsible for the accident puzzles Cornell. It is a wheel-like sign, and the one in particular had a spoke missing. That sign now has the spoke replaced. Cornell suspects somehow — since the Hendersons have vanished—that the sign was repaired coincidentally with the Hendersons' disappearance. Significantly the missing spoke had pointed toward the Henderson farm.

Steve Cornell starts out on a road trip searching for more signs. He discovers one with a spoke missing and follows directions to an isolated farm. He meets a young girl on the road near it and makes the astounding discovery that she has a body of steel-hard structure. The girl is a walking Mekstrom disease—but fully alive and healthy! The girl endeavors to force him to accompany her to the farm, but Cornell, in sudden bewildered fear, escapes and tears off down the highway.

Cornell now realizes that true Mekstroms walk the Earth, people with indestructible bodies, supermen and superwomen. He feels somehow that Catherine's disappearance, the faked accident report, and his own life is somehow slowly but surely being enmeshed in a hidden struggle. The highway signs, he is convinced, are pointers to an underground organization—the Mekstroms.

In desperation Cornell goes to the Medical Center and interviews Scholar Phelps, posing as a science writer. He learns the background of Mekstrom's disease, that medical science finds it incurable; he does not tell Phelps what he has discovered. He is about to leave deciding that he needs the help of a telepath—Nurse Farrow who cared for him in the hospital—when he makes the startling discovery that Scholar Phelps is himself a Mekstrom!

CHAPTER VII

NURSE Gloria Farrow waved at me from the ramp of the jetliner, and I ran forward to collect her baggage. She eyed me curiously but said no more than the usual greetings and indication of which bag was hers.

I knew that she was reading my mind like a psychologist all the time. as she followed me to my car without saying a word, and let me install her luggage in the trunk.

Then, for the first time, she spoke: "Steve Cornell, you're as

healthy as I am."

"I admit it."

"Then what is this all about? You don't need a nurse!"

"I need a competent witness, Miss Farrow."

"For what?" She looked puzzled. "Suppose you stay right here and start explaining."

"You'll listen to the bitter end?"

"I've two hours before the next plane goes back. You'll have that time to convince me—or else. Okay?"

"That's a deal." I fumbled around for a beginning, and then I decided to start right at the beginning, whether it sounded cockeyed or not.

Giving information to a telepath is the easiest thing in the world. While I started at the beginning, I fumbled and finally ended up by going back and forth in a haphazard manner, but Miss Farrow managed to insert the trivia in the right chronological order so that when I finished, she nodded with interest.

I thought the question: *Am I nuts?*

"No, Steve," she replied solemnly. "I don't think so. You've managed to accept data which is obviously mingled truth and falsehood, and you've managed to question the validity of all of it."

I grunted. "How about the crazy

man who questions his own sanity, using this personal question as proof of his sanity since nuts all *know* they're sane?"

"No nut can think that deep into complication. What I mean is that they cannot even question their own sanity in the first premise of postulated argument. But forget that, what I want to know is where you intend to go from here."

I shook my head unhappily. "When I called you I had it all laid out like a roadmap. I was going to show you proof and use you as an impartial observer to convince someone else. Then we'd go to the Medical Center and hand it to them on a platter. Since then I've had a shock that I can't get over, or plan beyond. Scholar Phelps is a Mekstrom. That means that the guy knows what gives with Mekstrom's Disease and yet he is running an outfit that professes to be helpless in the face of this disease. For all we know Phelps may be the head of the Highways in Hiding, an organization strictly for profit of some sort and at the expense of the public welfare."

"You're certain that Phelps is a Mekstrom?"

"Not absolutely positive. I had to close my mind because there might be a telepath on tap. But I can tell you that nobody with normal flesh-type fingers ever made that solid rap."

"A fingernail?"

I shook my head at her. "That's a click. With any ear at all you'd note the difference."

"I'll accept it for the moment. But lacking your original plan, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm not sure beyond showing you the facts. Maybe I should call up that F. B. I. team that called on me after Thorndyke's disappearance and put it in their laps."

"Good idea. But why would Scholar Phelps be lying? And beyond your basic suspicions, what can you prove?"

"Very little. A, admit that my case is extremely thin. I saw Philip Harrison turning loose the head bolts on a tractor engine with a small end wrench. It should require a crossbar socket and a lot of muscle." I grunted with a mingled feeling of amusement and distress. "A mechanic's idea of how a head bolt should be tightened is to stop tightening one quarter turn before the bolt twists off." Miss Farrow did not seem to appreciate the humor of this so I went on: "Next is the girl in Ohio who should be a bloody mess from the way she was treated. Instead she got up and tried to chase me. Then answer me a puzzler; did the Harrisons move because their daughter Marian caught Mekstrom's, or did they move because they felt that I was too close to discovering their sec-

ret? The Highway was relocated after that, you'll recall."

"It sounds frightfully complicated, Steve."

"You bet it does," I grunted. "So next I meet a guy who is supposed to know all the answers; a man dedicated to the public welfare, medicine, and the ideal of Service. A man sworn to the Hippocratic Oath. Or," I went on bitterly, "is it the Hypocritic Oath?"

"Steve, please—"

"Please, Hell!" I stormed. "Why is the bastard sitting there in a Mekstrom hide while he is overtly grieving over the painful death of some of his fellow men?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, I'm tired of being pushed around," I growled.

"Pushed around?" she asked quietly.

WITH a trace of scorn, I said, "Miss Farrow, I can see two possible answers. Either I am being pushed around for some deliberate reason, or I'm too smart, too cagey and too dangerous for them to handle directly. It takes only about eight weeks for me to reluctantly abandon the second in favor of the first."

"But what makes you think you are being pushed?" she wanted to know.

"You can't tell me that I am so important that they couldn't erase

me as easily as they did Catherine and Dr. Thorndyke. And now that his name comes up, let's ask why any doctor who once met a casual patient, would go to the bother of sending a postcard with a message on it that is certain to cause me unhappiness. He's also the guy who nudged me by calling my attention to my so-called 'shock hallucination' about Father Harrison lifting my car while Phillip Harrison raced into the fire to make the rescue. "Add it up," I told her sharply. "Next he is invited to Medical center to study Mekstrom's. Only instead of landing there, he sends me a postcard with one of the Highways in the picture, after he disappears."

Miss Farrow nodded thoughtfully. "It is all tied up with your Highways and your Mekstrom People."

"That isn't all," I said. "How come the Harrisons moved so abruptly?"

"You're posing questions that I can't answer," complained Miss Farrow. "And I'm not one hundred percent convinced that you are right."

"You are here, and if you take a look at what I'll show you, you'll be convinced. We'll put it this way, to start; Something cockeyed is going on. Now, one more thing I can add, and this is the part that confuses me: Everything that has

been done seems to point to me. So far as I can see they are operating just as though they want me to start a big hassle that will end up by getting the Highways in Hiding out of their Hiding."

"Why on earth would they be doing that?" she wanted to know.

"I don't have the foggiest notion. But I do have that feeling and there is evidence pointing that way. They've let me in on things that normally they'd be able to conceal from a highly trained telepath. So I intend to go along with them, because somewhere at the bottom of it all we'll find the answer."

She nodded agreement.

We had been sitting in the car at the airfield parking lot all this time because I did not want to be driving and talking at the same time, and also because the parking lot was not teeming with people.

But now I started up the car, saying, "I'm going to find us one of the Highways in Hiding and we'll follow it to one of the way stations. Then you'll see for yourself that there is something definitely fishy going on."

"This I'd like to see," she replied quietly. Almost too quiet. I took a dig at her as I turned the car out through a tight corner of the lot onto the road. She was sitting there with a noncommittal expression on her face and I wondered why. She

replied to my thought: "Steve, you must face one thing. Anything you firmly believe will necessarily pass across your mind as fact. So forgive me if I hold a few small doubts until I have a chance to survey some of the evidence at first hand."

"Sure," I told her. "The first bit won't be hard."

I drove eagerly across Illinois into Iowa watching for road signs. I knew that once I convinced someone else, it would be easier to convince a third, and a fourth, and a fiftieth until the entire world was out on the warpath. We drove all day, stopping for chow now and then, behaving like a couple out on a vacation tour. We stopped in a small town along about midnight and found a hotel without having come upon any of the hidden highways.

We met at breakfast, talked our ideas over mildly, and took off again. We crossed into Nebraska about noon and continued to meander until late in the afternoon when we came upon our first give-away road sign.

"There," I told her triumphantly.

She nodded. "I see the sign, Steve. That much I knew. Now all you have to do is to show me the trail-blazes up in that emblem."

"Unless they've changed their method," I told her, "this one leads

West, slightly south of." I stopped the car not many yards from the sign and went over it with my sense of perception. *You'll note the ease with which the emblem could be turned upside down*, I interjected. *Note the similar width of the top and bottom trefoil, so that only a trained and interested observer can tell the difference.*

I drove along until we saw one on the other side of the road and we stopped again, giving the sign a thorough going over. *Note that signs leading away from the direction are upside down*, I went on. I didn't say a word, I was using every ounce of energy in running my perception over the sign and commenting on its various odds and ends.

Now, I finished, we'll drive along this highway in hiding until we come to some intersection or hide-out. Then you'll be convinced.

She was silent.

We took off along that road rather fast and we followed it for miles, passing sign after sign with its emblem turned up along the right side of the road and turned upsidedown when the sign was on the left.

Eventually we came to a crossing highway, and at that I pointed triumphantly. "Note the missing spoke!" I said with considerable enthusiasm. "Now, Miss Farrow, we shall first turn against it for a few

miles and then we shall U-turn and come back along the cross highway with it."

"I'm beginning to be convinced, Steve."

We turned North against the sign and went forty or fifty miles just to be sure. The signs were all against us. Eventually I turned into a gas station and filled the crate up to the scuppers. As we turned back South, I asked her, "Any more comment?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

I nodded. "If you want, we'll take a jaunt along our original course."

She shook her head again.

"In other words you are more than willing to be convinced?"

"Yes," she said simply. She went silent then and I wondered what she was thinking about, but she didn't bother to tell me.

Eventually we came back to the crossroad, and with a feeling of having been successful, I continued South with a confidence that I had not felt before. We stopped for dinner in a small town, ate hastily but well, and then had a very mild debate.

"Shall we have a drink and relax for a moment?"

"I'd like it," she replied honestly. "But somehow I doubt that I could relax."

"I know. But it does seem like a good idea to take it easy for a

half hour. It might even be better if we stopped over and took off again in the morning."

"Steve," she told me, "the only way I could relax or go to sleep would be to take on a roaring load so that I'd pass out cold. I'd rather not. Because I'd get up tomorrow with a most colossal hangover. Frankly, I'm excited and I'd prefer to follow this thing to a finish."

"It's a deal," I said. "We'll go until we have to stop."

It was about eight o'clock when we hit the road again.

BY nine-forty-five we'd covered something better than two hundred miles, followed another intersection turn according to the missing spoke, and were heading well toward the upper right-hand corner of Colorado on the road map.

At ten o'clock plus a few minutes we came upon the roadsign that pointed the way to a ranch-type house set prettily on the top of a small knoll several hundred yards back from the main road. I stopped briefly a few hundred feet from the lead-in road and asked Miss Farrow:

"What's your telepath range? You've never told me."

She replied instantly, "Intense concentration directed at me is about a half mile. Superficial thinking that might include me or

my personality as a by-thought, about five hundred yards. To pick up a thought that has nothing to do with me or my interests, not much more than a couple of hundred feet. Things that are definitely none of my business close down to forty or fifty feet."

That was about the average for a person with a bit of psi training either in telepathy or in esper; it matched mine fairly well, excepting that part about things that were none of my business. She meant *thoughts* and not *things*. I had always had a hard time differentiating between things that were none of my damned business, although I do find it more difficult to dig the contents of a letter between two unknown parties at a given distance than it is to dig a letter written or addressed to a person I know. *Things* are, by and large, a lot less personal than thoughts, if I'm saying anything new.

"Well," I told her, "this is it. We're going to go in close enough for you to take a pathic look-around. Keep your mind sensitive. If you dig any danger, yell out. I'm going to extend my esper as far as I can and if I suddenly take off like a startled spacecraft, it's because I have uncovered something disagreeable. But keep your mind on them and not me, because I'm relying on you to keep posted on their mental angle."

Miss Farrow nodded. "It's hard to remember that other people haven't the ability to make contact mentally. It's like a normal man talking to a blind man and referring constantly to visible things because he doesn't understand. I'll try to remember."

"I'm going to back in," I said. "Then if trouble turns up, I'll have an advantage. As soon as they feel our minds coming in at them, they'll know that we're not in there for their health. So here we go!"

"I'm a good actor," she said. "No matter what I say, I'm with you all the way!"

I yanked the car forward, and angled back. I hit the road easily and started backing along the driveway at a rather fast speed with my eyes half-closed to give my esper sense the full speed benefit of my concentration along the road. When I was not concentrating on how I was going to turn the wheel at the next curve I thought. *I hope these folks know the best way to get to Colorado Springs from here. Damn it, we're lost!*

Miss Farrow squeezed my arm gently, letting me know that she was thinking the same general thoughts.

Suddenly she said, "It's a dead area, Steve."

It was a dead area, all right. Just like any dead area. My perception, instead of slowly fading in-

to an inability to dig anything came to a barrier that made it fade from full perception to not being able to perceive anything in a matter of yards. It always gives me an eerie feeling when I approach a dead area and find that I can see a building clearly and not be able to cast my perception within a few feet of the front door.

So I kept on backing up into the fringe of that dead area until I was deep within the edge and it took all my concentration to perceive the road a few feet ahead of my rear wheels so that I could steer. I was inching now, coming back like a blind man feeling his way. We were within about forty feet of the ranch house when Miss Farrow yelped:

"They're surrounding us, Steve!"

My hands whipped into action and my heavy right foot came down on the gas-pedal. The car shuddered, howled like a wounded banshee, and then leaped forward with a roar.

A man sprang out of the bushes and stood in front of the car like a statue with his hand held up. Miss Farrow screamed something unintelligible and clutched at my arm frantically. I threw her hand off with a snarl, kept my foot rammed down hard and hit the man dead center. The car bucked and I heard metal crumple angrily. We lurched, bounced viciously

twice as my wheels passed over his floundering body, and then we were racing like completely gone idiots along a road that should not have been covered at more than twenty. The main road came into sight and I sliced the car around with a screech of the rear tires, controlled the deliberate skid with some fancy wheel-work and some fast digging of the surrounding dangers.

Then we were tearing along the broad and beautifully clear concrete with the speedometer needle running into the one-fifteen region.

"Steve," said Miss Farrow breathlessly, "That man you hit —"

In a hard voice I said, "He was getting to his feet when I drove out of range."

"I know," she said in a whimper. "I was in his mind. He was not hurt! He was angry, filled with hate and violence and disdain. God! Steve—what are we up against?" Her voice rose to a wail.

"I don't know, exactly," I said. "But I know what we're going to do."

"But Steve—what can we do?"

"Alone or together, very little. But we can bring one more out along these damned Highways and convince a fourth and a fifth and a fiftieth and a thousandth. By then we'll be shoved back off the stage while the big wheels grind pain-

fully slow but exceedingly meticulous."

"That'll take time."

"Certainly. But we've got us a start. Look how long getting a start took in the first place."

"But what is their purpose?" she asked.

"That I can't say. I can't say a lot of things, like how, and why and wherefore. But I know that now we have a front tooth in this affair we're not going to let go." I thought for a moment. *I could use Thorndyke; he'd be the next guy to convince if we could find him. Or maybe Catherine, if we could find her. The next best thing is to get hold of that F. B. I. Team that called on me. There's a pair of cold-blooded characters that seem willing to sift through a million tons of ash to find one valuable cinder. They'll listen. I—*

Miss Farrow looked at her watch; I dug it as she made the gesture. *Eleven O'clock.*

"Going to call?" she asked.

"No," I said. "It's too late. It's one-thirty in New York now and the F. B. I. Team wouldn't be ready for a fast job at this hour."

"So."

"I have no intention of placing a 'When you are ready' call to a number identified with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Not when a full eight hours must elapse between the call and a reply. Too

much can happen to us in the meantime. But if I call in the morning, we can probably take care of ourselves well enough until they arrive if we stay in some place that is positively teeming with citizens. Sensible?"

"Sounds reasonable, Steve."

I let the matter drop at that; I put the go-pedal down to the floor and fractured a lot of speed laws until we came to Denver.

We made Denver just before midnight and drove around until we located a hotel that filled our needs. It was large, which would prevent overt operations on the part of the 'enemy' and it was in a dead area, which would prevent one of them from reading our minds while we slept, and so enable them to lay counterplans against us.

The bellhop gave us a knowing leer as we registered separately, but I was content to let him think what he wanted. Better that he get the wrong idea about us than the right one. He fiddled around in Miss Farrow's room on the ninth, bucking for a big tip—not for good service, but for leaving us alone, which he did by demonstrating how big a nuisance he could be if not properly rewarded. But finally he got tired of his drawer-opening and lamp-testing and towel-stacking, and escorted me up to the twelfth. I led him out with a five spot clutched in his fist and the leer even

stronger.

If he expected me to race downstairs as soon as he was out of ear-shot, he was mistaken, for I hit the sack like the proverbial ton of crushed mortar. It had been literally weeks since I'd had a pleasant, restful sleep that was not broken by fitful dreams and worry-insomnia. Now that we had something solid to work on, I could look forward to some concrete action, instead of merely feeling pushed around.

CHAPTER VIII

I'D put in for an eight o'clock call, but my sleep had been so sound and perfect that I was all slept out by seven-thirty. I was anxious to get going so I dressed and shaved in a hurry and cancelled the eight o'clock call. Then I asked the operator to connect me with 913.

A gruff, angry male voice snarled out of the earpiece at me. I began to apologize profusely but the other guy slammed the phone down on the hook hard enough to make my ear ring.

I jiggled my hook angrily and when the operator answered I told her that she'd miscued. She listened to my complaint and then replied in a pettish tone, "But I did ring 913, sir, I'll try again."

I wanted to tell her to just try, that there was no 'again' about it, but I didn't. I tried to dig through

the murk to her switchboard but I couldn't dig a foot through this area. I waited impatiently until she re-made the connections at her switchboard and I heard the burring of the phone as the other end rang. Then the same mad-bull-rage voice delivered a number of pointed comments about people who ring up honest citizens in the middle of the night; and then he hung up again in the middle of my apology. I got irked again and demanded that the operator connect me with the registration clerk. To him I told my troubles.

"One moment, sir," he said. A half minute later he returned with, "Sorry, sir. There is no Farrow registered. Could I have mis-heard you?"

"No, goddammit," I snarled. "It's Farrow. F as in Frank; A as in Arthur; Double R as in Robert; O as in Oliver; and W as in Washington. I saw her register, I went with her and the bellhop to her room, Number 913, and saw her installed. Then the same 'hop took me up to my room in 1224 on the Twelfth."

There was another moment of silence. Then he said, "You're Mr. Cornell. Registered in Room 1224 last night approximately four minutes after midnight."

"I know all about me. I was there and did it myself. And if I registered at four after midnight,

Miss Farrow must have registered about two after midnight because the ink was still wet on her card when I wrote my name. We came in together, we were traveling together, Now, what gives?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. We have no guest named Farrow."

"See here," I snapped, "Did you ever have a guest named Farrow?"

"Not in the records I have available at this desk. Perhaps in the past there may have been—"

"Forget the past. What about the character in 913?"

I felt a sudden chill as he left the phone again. An unreasoning fear, sort of like the child lost in a big city who cannot make any of the adults understand what he is trying to tell them. It was beginning to sound and look dangerously familiar. I managed to hold down my fright by main force, by telling myself that any part of hysteria would lose me both the game, the match, and the future.

The registration clerk returned and informed me coldly, "Room 913 has been occupied by a Mr. Horace Westfield for over three months, Mr. Cornell. There is no mistake." His voice sounded professionally sympathetic, and I knew that he would forget my troubles as soon as his telephone was put back on its hook.

"Forget it." I snapped and hung up angrily. Then I went towards

the elevators walking in a sort of dreamlike daze. There was a cold lump of something concrete hard beginning to form in the pit of my stomach. Wetness ran down my spine and a drop of sweat dropped from my armpit and hit my body a few inches above my belt like a pellet of icy hail. My face felt cold but when I wiped it with the palm of a shaking hand I found that it was beaded with a cold, oily sweat. Everything seemed unreally horrifying.

"Nine," I told the elevator operator in a voice that sounded far away and hoarse.

I wondered whether this might not be a very vivid dream and maybe if I went all the way back to my room, took a short nap, and got up to start all over again, I would awaken to honest reality.

The elevator stopped at Nine and I walked the corridor that was familiar from last night. I rapped on the door of Room 913.

The door opened and a big stubble-faced gorilla glared out and snarled at me: "Are you the persistent bastard?"

"Look," I said patiently, "Last night a woman friend of mine registered at this hotel and I accompanied her to this door. Number 913. Now—"

A long apelike arm came out and caught me by the coat lapels. He hauled and I went in fast. His

breath was sour and his eyes were bloodshot and he was angry all the way through. His other hand caught me by the seat of the pants and he danced me into the room like a jumping jack.

"Friend," he ground out, "Take a look. There ain't no woman in this room, see?"

HE whirled, carrying me off my feet. He took a lunging step forward and hurled me onto the bed, where I carried the springs deep down, to bounce up and off and forward to come up flat against the far wall. I landed sort of spread-eagle flat and seemed to hang there before I slid down the wall to the floor with a meaty-sounding Whump! Then before I could collect my wits or myself, he came over the bed in one long leap and had me hauled upright by the coat lapels again. The other hand was cocked back level with his shoulder; it looked the size of a twenty-five pound sack of flour and was probably as hard as set cement.

Steve, I told myself, *This time you're in for it!*

"All right," I said as apologetically as I knew how, "so I've made a bad mistake. I apologize. I'll also admit that you could wipe up the hotel with me. But do you have to prove it?"

I wish, if only for my mental

self-satisfaction, that I could relate that Mr. Horace Westfield's mental processes were slow, cumbersome, and crude. But he was as fast and hard on his mental feet as he was on his physical feet. He made some preliminary remarks about my intelligence, my upbringing, my parentage and its legal status, and my unwillingness to face a superior enemy. During this catalog of my virtueless existence, he gandywalked to the door and opened it.

He concluded his lecture by suggesting that in the future I accept anything that any registration clerk said as God-Stated Truth, and if I then held any doubts I should take them to the police. Then he hurdled me out of the room by just sort of shoving me away. I sailed across the hall on my toes, backward, and slapped my frame flat again, and once more I hung against the wall until the kinetic energy had spent itself. Then I landed on wobbly ankles as the door to Room 913 came closed with a violent slam.

I cursed the modern habit of building hotels in dead areas, although I admitted that I'd steer clear of any hotel in a clear area myself. But I didn't need a clear area nor a sense of perception to inform me that Room 913 was absolutely and totally devoid of any remote sign of female habitation. In fact, I gathered the impression

that for all of his brute strength and virile masculinity, Mr. Horace Westfield hadn't entertained a woman in that room since he'd been there.

There was one other certainty: It was impossible for any agency short of sheer fairyland magic to have produced overnight a room that displayed its long-term occupancy by a not-too-immaculate character. That distinctive sour smell takes a long time to permeate the furnishings of any decent hotel; I wondered why a joint as well kept as this one would put up with a bird as careless of his person as Mr. Horace Westfield.

So I'd come to the reluctant conclusion that Room 913 was not occupied by Nurse Farrow, but I was not yet convinced that she was totally missing from the premises.

Instead of taking the elevator, I took to the stairs and tried the Eighth. My perception was not good for much in this murk, but I was mentally sensitive to Nurse Farrow and if I could get close enough to her, I might be able to perceive some trace of her even through the deadness. I put my forehead against the door of Room 813 and drew a blank. All I could dig was no farther than the inside of the door. If Farrow were in 813, I couldn't dig a trace of her. So I went down to 713 and tried there.

I was determined to try every-

13th Room on every floor, but as I was standing with my forehead against the door to Room 413, someone came up behind me quietly and asked in a rough voice: "Just what do you think you're doing, Mister?"

His dress indicated housedick, but of course I couldn't dig the license in his wallet any more than he could read my mental comment, *None of your business, flatfoot!* I said, "I'm looking for a friend."

"You'd better come with me," he said flatly. "There's been complaints."

"Yeah?" I growled. "Maybe I made one of them myself."

"Want to start something?" he snapped.

I shrugged and he smiled. It was a stony smile, humorless as a crevasse in a rock-face. He kept that professional-type smile on his face until we reached the manager's office. The manager was out, but one of the assistant managers was at his desk. The little sign on the desk said "Henry Walton. Assistant Manager."

Mr. Walton said, coldly, "What seems to be the trouble, Mr. Cornell?"

I decided to play it just as though I were back at the beginning again. "Last night," I explained very carefully, "I checked into this hotel. I was accompanied by a woman companion. A registered

nurse, Miss Gloria Farrow. She registered first, and we were taken by one of your bellboys to Rooms 913 and 1224 respectively. I went with Miss Farrow to 913 and saw her enter. Then the bellhop escorted me to 1224 and left me for the night. This morning I can find no trace of Miss Farrow anywhere in this fleabag."

He bristled at the derogatory title but he covered it quickly. "Please be assured that no one connected with this hotel has any intention of confusing you, Mr. Cornell."

"I'm tired of playing games," I snapped. "I'll accept your statement so far as the management goes, but someone is guilty of screwing up your registration lists."

"That's rather harsh," he replied coldly. "Falsifying or tampering with hotel registration lists is illegal. What you've just said amounts to libel or slander, you know."

"Not if it's true."

I half-expected Henry Walton to backwater fast, but instead, he merely eyed me with the same expression of distaste that he might have used upon finding half of a fuzzy caterpillar in his green salad. As cold as a cake of carbon dioxide snow, he said, "But can you prove this, Mr. Cornell?"

"Your night crew—"

"You've given us a bit of trouble this morning," He informed me. "So I've taken the liberty of calling in the night crew for you." He pressed a button and a bunch came in and lined up as if for formal inspection. "Boys," said Walton quietly, "suppose you tell us what you know about Mr. Cornell's arrival here last night."

They nodded their heads in unison.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "I want a reliable witness to listen to this. In fact, if I could, I'd like to have their stories made under oath."

"You'd like to register a formal charge. Perhaps of kidnapping, or maybe illegal restraint?"

"Just get me an impartial witness," I told him sourly.

"Very well." He picked up his telephone and spoke into it. We waited a few minutes, and finally a very prim young woman came in. She was followed by a uniformed policeman. She was carrying one of those subminiature silent typewriters which she set up on its little stand with a few efficient motions.

"Miss Mason is our certified public stenographer," he said. "Officer, I'll want your signature on her copy when we're finished. This is a simple routine matter, but it must be legal to the satisfaction of Mr. Cornell. Now, boys, go ahead and explain. Give your name and position for the record."

It was then that I noticed that the night crew had arranged themselves in chronological order. The elderly gent spoke first. He'd been the night doorman but now he was stripped of his gold admiral's braid and he looked just like any other man of middle age.

"George Comstock," he announced. "Doorman. As soon as I saw the car angling out of traffic, I pressed the call-button for a bell boy. Peter Wright came out and was standing in readiness by the time Mr. Cornell's car came to a stop by the curb. Johnny Olson was out next, and after Peter had taken Mr. Cornell's bag, Johnny got into Mr. Cornell's car and took off for the hotel garage—"

Walton interrupted. "Let each man tell what he did himself. No prompting, please."

"Well, then, you've heard my part in it. Johnny Olson took off in Mr. Cornell's car and Peter Wright took off with Mr. Cornell's bag, and Mr. Cornell followed Peter."

The next man in line, at a nod from the assistant manager, stepped forward about a half a pace and said, "I'm Johnny Olson. Chauffeur. I followed Peter Wright out of the door and after Peter had collected Mr. Cornell's bag, I got in Mr. Cornell's car and took it to the hotel garage."

The third was Peter Wright, the

bellhop. "I carried his bag to the desk and waited until he registered. Then we went up to Room 1224. I opened the door, lit the lights, opened the window, and stuff. Mr. Cornell tipped me a buck and I left him there. Alone."

"I'm Thomas Boothe, the elevator operator. I took Mr. Cornell and Peter Wright to the Twelfth. Peter said I should wait because he wouldn't be long, and so I waited on the Twelfth until Peter got back. That's all."

"I'm Doris Caspary, the night telephone operator. Mr. Cornell called me about fifteen minutes after twelve and asked me to put him down for a call at eight o'clock this morning. Then he called at about seven thirty and said that he was already awake and not to bother."

Henry Walton said, "That's about it, Mr. Cornell."

"But—"

The policeman looked puzzled. "What is the meaning of all this? If I'm to witness any statements like these, I'll have to know what for."

Walton looked at me. I couldn't afford not to answer. Wearily I said, "Last night I came in here with a woman companion and we registered in separate rooms. She went into 913 and I waited until she was installed and then went to my own room on the Twelfth."

This morning there is no trace of her."

I went on to tell him a few more details, but the more I told him the more he lifted his eyebrows.

"Done any drinking?" he asked me curtly.

"No."

"Certain?"

"Absolutely."

Walton looked at his crew. They burst into a chorus of, "Well, he was steady on his feet," and "He didn't seem under the influence," and a lot of other statements, all generally indicating that for all they knew, I could have been gassed to the ears, but luckily one of those rare guys who don't show it.

The policeman smiled thinly. "Just why was this registered nurse travelling with you?"

I gave them the excuse-type statement; the one about the accident and that I felt that I was still a bit on the rocky side and so forth. About all I did for that was to convince the policeman that I was not a stable character. After all, his attitude seemed to indicate any man travelling with a nurse must either be physically sick or maybe mentally out of tune.

Then with a sudden thought, I whirled on Johnny Olson. "Will you get my car?" I asked him. He nodded after a nod from Walton. I said, "There's plenty of evidence in

my car. In the meantime, let's face one thing, officer. I've been accused of spinning a yarn. I'd hardly be demanding witnesses if I weren't telling the truth. I was standing beside Miss Farrow when she signed the register, complete with the R. N. title. It's too bad that hotels have taken to using card files instead of the old registration book. Cards are so easy to misplace—"

Walton cut in angrily. "If that's an accusation, I'm inclined to see that you make it in a court of law."

The policeman looked calm. "I'd take it easy, Mr. Cornell. Your story is not corroborated. But the employees of the hotel bear one another out. And from the record, it would appear that at no time from the moment your car slowed down in front of the main entrance up to the time that you were escorted down to your room, were you not under the eyes of at least two of them."

"I object to being accused of complicity in a kidnapping," put in the assistant manager.

"I object to being accused of mental incompetence," I snapped. "Why do we stand around accusing people back and forth when there's evidence if you'll only uncover it."

We stood there glaring at one another. The air grew tense. The only ones in the place that did not have

huge chips on their respective shoulders were the policeman and the certified stenographer, who was clicking her silent keys in lightning manner, taking down every comment as it was uttered.

Eventually Olson returned, to put an end to the thick silence. "Y'car's outside," he told me angrily.

"Fine," I said. "Now we'll go outside and take a look. You'll find plenty of traces of Miss Farrow's having been there. Officer—are you telepath or perceptive?"

"Perceptive," he said. "But not in here."

"How far out does this damned dead area extend?" I asked Walton

"About half way across the sidewalk."

"Okay. So let's all go."

We traipsed out to the curb. Miss Mason brought her little silent along, slipping the stand high up so that she could type from an erect position. We lined up along the curb and I looked into my car with a triumphant feeling.

And then that cold chill congealed my spine again. My car was clean and shining. It had been washed and buffed and polished until it looked as new as the day I picked it out on the salesroom floor.

Walton looked blank, and I whipped a thought at him: *Damned telepath!*

He nodded perceptibly and said smoothly, "I'm rather sorry we couldn't find any footprints. Because now, you see," and here he turned to the policeman and went on, "Mr. Cornell will now accuse us of having washed his car to destroy the evidence. However, you'll find that as a general policy of the hotel, the car-washing is performed as a standard service. In fact, if someone parks his car in our garage as a guest and his car is not rendered spick and span, someone is going to get fired for negligence."

So that was that. I took a fast look around, because I knew that I had to get out of there fast. If I remained to carry on any more argument, I'd be tapped for being a nuisance and juggled. The next step would be investigation, questioning, and probably someone would be able to establish the fact that I'd checked in at other hotels with Nurse Farrow in the same way—but that she'd disappeared somewhere along my trail.

I had no doubt at all that the whole damned hotel staff were all involved in Nurse Farrow's disappearance. But they'd done their job in such a way that if the question were pushed hard, I would end up answering formal charges, the top-most of which might be murder and concealment of the body.

I had to go on. I could do nothing by sitting in jail. This was the

time to get out first and worry about Farrow later.

So I opened the car door and slipped in. I fiddled with the so-called glove compartment and opened it; the maps were all neatly stacked and all the flub had been cleaned out. I fumbled inside and dropped a couple of road maps to the floor, and while I was down picking them up, I turned the ignition key which Olson had left plugged in the lock.

I took off with a jerk and a howl of tires.

There was the sudden shrill of a police whistle but it was stopped after one brief blast. As I turned the corner, I caught a fast backwards dig at them. They were filing back into the hotel. I did not believe that the policeman was part of the conspiracy, but I was willing to believe that Walton was going to slip the policeman a box of fine cigars as a reward for having helped them to get rid of a very embarrassing screwball.

CHAPTER IX

WELL, about all I learned from that last adventure was that some sort of pattern seemed definite. It was the same damned thing: First toss a guy into a tizzy, then show him a bit of interesting but perplexing evidence, push him around, get him in Dutch with the

cops, but not so deep in Dutch that they go around with that Old Bailey look in their eyes. Next let him have his head for long enough to collect some more evidence and then like the fish on the string, yank the bait out of reach as soon as the sucker makes a grab for it. It had pattern, all right. Except for one major item it was perfect: Patterns are always created for some use.

I couldn't see any use for the pattern I was following.

I tried a couple of ideas for size but they all came out not fitting right. About all I'd learned for my trouble was the almost certain knowledge that the Highways In Hiding were being used by a group of Mekstrom Disease people.

Now, once more putting aside the quaint notion that I was too smart or too difficult to handle directly, nothing added up to answer why they'd bother letting me run free to be a nuisance to them when they'd collected Thorndyke and Farrow with so little trouble. Of course, there was one common denominator to all three of the disappearances: They were all telepaths. But the largest common denominator was me. Or was I just an irrational fraction?

Accepting me as such, I decided to try it for size and came up with the following:

Catherine and I elope in the

time-honored manner to commit matrimony in connubial privacy, but along the way we crack up. This could hardly have been a planned misfortune; no one who was not a Mekstrom could come through such a pile up in any degree of certain safety even with a gang of Mekstroms handy to pull us out. So let's call the accident an accidental crack-up and take it from there.

Let's assume, then, that Catherine had recently become infected with Mekstrom's Disease, and that it was too early to know about it.

Now we crack up near the Harisons, who come to the rescue. They dig around the wreck and find two people alive under it, one with Mekstroms and one without. They snake the pair of us out; then because Catherine was Mekstrom infected, they conceal her.

Here I had to leave the question of *Why?* alone and go on with my reasoning.

Now, it is a reasonable demand by the Authorities that each and every automobile going along the highway contains a minimum of one citizen; and a further reasonable belief that for each and every accident there must be an accident case. Whether the case be mild or fatal is of no moment, the fact is that there should be a victim even though the only symptom of his hurt is being slightly pale

green from fright.

Let's now assume that they intended to do something about me as soon as I was repaired at the hospital. Again I had to omit asking or trying to answer the question of *What?* and go on: In the meantime I'd been shoved into noticing the highway sign and I was out taking observations. I could hardly disappear, right along with Catherine and Thorndyke, excepting that Nurse Farrow had disappeared—

Or had she? Had Farrow stopped, after finding out how much I knew? Or had Farrow come with me deliberately to give me another jolt?

I stopped the car to think that one over. She'd come, I had believed, because she felt that she owed me something for having fluffed her lines by misnaming my girl in the hospital. But she was a trained nurse, and one of the things they train out of nurses is mistakes of that nature. On the other hand, it began to seem rather easy for a trained nurse to get a leave of absence from a regular job in a hospital, she'd been easy to convince, and she'd been oh, so easy to lose.

I still let the *Why?* go unquestioned. I could theorize all year without coming up with anything cogent. At this point, no matter what happened, I intended to take some very concentrated, direct, bel-

ligerent action. Running and poking my nose into their affairs had gotten me nothing. Maybe making a racket like a volcano ripping off its top, I'd stir up enough steam to learn where all the heat came from.

So I took off again, planning my next move.

One thing I needed: Armament. Preferably some heavy ordnance. From what I'd seen, any four-year-old Mekstrom could take me apart at the joints. This is an adventure I'd prefer to duck. So I drove until I came to a small town, and then I looked for a gun store.

COLORADO is in that part of the United States where it is still possible to buy a shooting iron by merely walking into the store, picking it out, and paying for it over the counter. Guns were sold like hammers or miner's picks or any other tool. I selected a Bonanza .375 which is a piece of artillery that packs enough wallop to stop a charging hippo. All you have to have is enough strength to hold the sights on him while the kick tries to dislocate your shoulder. The piece is small for its punch, so it fit well in my hip pocket without unballasting me.

I adjusted my trim by dropping a box of shells into the other hip pocket, and then I took off again. I stopped here and there to get used to my weapon; it gave me a

bit of a 'Pitcher's Arm' for a bit, but then I got used to the kick. It was a very satisfactory gun; it would pulverize a four-inch boulder if the hit was square, and I felt that even if it did not penetrate the hide of a Mekstrom, it would set the guy back on his bottom from sheer kinetic energy.

By the time I reached Yellowstone, me and my Bonanza .375 were firm friends.

I was going to find and drive down the same road that Dr. Thorndyke had taken, the one in the postcard. I wanted to see if Steve Cornell would disappear like the rest of them. I hoped so. For maybe Catherine would be at the end of the road. I found it near dusk and began to look for something to poke into.

The road was deserted except for me. The signs led me nicely, although I was aware of one interesting point: None of them held any symbol that could be interpreted as a mileage marker. Apparently the underground were not set to tell their own kind how far it was to the next way station. I went on and on at a fair clip, until I came upon the inevitable sign with the missing spoke.

On the right was a sprawled ranch-type establishment except for a two-story house. Like most places it was set in a dead area, some edges of which were close

enough to the road so that my es-
per range touched the fringe.

I came to the lead-in road,
paused, and then changed my mind
for some reason that could only be
called a hunch.

Instead, I went on to the next
town, some twenty miles away,
which I reached about dark. I stop-
ped for a leisurely dinner, saw a
moving picture at the drive-in,
killed a few at the bar, and started
back to the way-station about mid-
night.

The name, dug from the mail-
box, was Macklin.

Again I did not turn in. I park-
ed the car down the highway by
about three miles, figuring that
only a psi of doctor's degree would
be able to dig anything at that
distance. A Rhine Scholar could,
of course, but there can't be more
than a couple of hundred in the
whole world and I counted on there
being no such mental giant in this
out of the way place.

I made my way back toward the
ranch house across the fields and
among the rolling rock. I extended
my perception as far as I could; I
made myself sensitive to danger
and covered the ground foot by
foot, digging for traps, alarm lines,
photocell trips, and parties who
might be lying in wait for me.

I encountered no sign of any trip
or trap all the way to the fringe of
the dead zone.

I skirted the dead area, probing
into the murk as I went. If they
were lying just inside the fringe
probing out, I had just as good a
chance to probe in to them as they
had of digging me from the inside
out. I connected with no one, noth-
ing.

The possibility that they knew
of my presence and were comfort-
ably awaiting me deep within the
zone also occurred to me, and so I
was very cautious as I cased the
layout and decided to make my
entry at the point where the irre-
gular boundary of the dead area
was closest to the house itself.

I entered and became completely
blind. The night was starlight bril-
liant but the moon was not in the
sky to give light. Starlight cast just
enough so that I could see to walk
without falling into a chuck hole or
stumbling over something, but be-
yond a few yards everything lost
shape and became a murky blob.
The night was dead silent except
for an occasional hiss of wind
through the brush.

Esperwise I was not covering
much more than my eyes could see.
I stepped deeper into the zone and
lost another yard of perception. I
kept probing at the murk, sort of
like poking a finger at a hanging
blanket. It moved if I dug hard
enough in any direction, but as
soon as I released the pressure, the
murk moved right back where it

was before.

I crouched and took a few more steps into the zone, got to a place where I could begin to see the outlines of the house itself.

DARK, silent, it looked uninhabited. I wished that there had been a college course in house-breaking, prowling and second-story operations. I needed a degree in it now. I went at it slowly. I took my sweet time crossing the boards of the back verandah, even though the short hair on the back of my neck was beginning to prickle from nervousness. I was also scared. At any given moment, they had the legal right to open a window, poke out a field-piece, and blow me into bloody ribbons where I stood.

The zone was really a dead one. My esper range was no more than about six inches from my forehead; a motion picture of Steve Cornell sounding out the border of a window with his forehead would have looked funny, it was not funny at the time. But I found that the sash was not locked and that the flyscreen could be unshipped from the outside.

I entered a dining room. Inside, it was blacker than the Earl of Hell's pants pocket.

I crossed the dining room by sheer feel and instinct and managed to get to the hallway without mak-

ing any racket. At this point I stopped and asked myself what the hell I thought I was trying to do. I had to admit that I had no plan in definite form, I was just prowling the joint to see what information I might be able to pick up.

Down the hall I found a library. I'd been told that you tell what kind of people folks are by inspecting their library, and so I conned the book titles by running my head along a row of books.

I don't know what I expected to find. In the back of my mind there lurked that unfounded suspicion that the Mekstrom's Flesh people might be extra-terrestrial, and maybe I thought that I might find some literature in an unknown language on some unknown kind of medium, bound in an exotic manner. Actually, the fact that everybody that I'd had any contact with among this underground looked, sounded, and acted like human beings except for their astonishing durability had dimmed this extra-terrestrial notion of mine considerably. The books in the library dimmed it even more.

No, the books in the library indicated to me that this was a family of some size with rather broad tastes. There was everything from science fiction to Shakespeare, everything from philosophy to adventure. A short row of kid's books. A bible. Encyclopaedia Britannica

(Published in Chicago), in fifty-four volumes, but there were no places that were worn that might give me an idea as to any special interest.

The living room was also blank of any evidence of anything out of the ordinary. I turned away and stood in the hallway, blocked by indecision. I was a fool, I kept telling myself, because I did not have any experience in casing a joint, and what I knew had been studied out of old-time detective tales. Even if the inhabitants of the place were to let me go at it in broad daylight, I'm not too sure that I'd do a good job of finding something of interest except by sheer luck. But on the other hand, I'd gotten nowhere by dodging and ducking. I was in no mood to slope, quivering in fear. I was more inclined to emit a bellow just to see what would happen next.

So instead of sneaking quietly away, I found the stairs and started to go up very slowly.

It occurred to me at about the third step that I must be right. Anybody with any sense wouldn't keep anything dangerous in their downstairs library. It would be too much like a safe-cracker storing his nitro in the liquor cabinet or the murderer who hangs his weapon over the mantelpiece.

Yet everybody kept some sort of records, or had things in their homes that either should not or at

least were not shown to visiting firemen. And if it weren't on the second floor, then it might be in the cellar. If I weren't caught first, I'd prowl the whole damned place, inch by inch—avoiding if possible those rooms in which people slept.

The fifth step squeaked ever so faintly, but it sounded like someone pulling a railroad spike out of a freight-car sized packing case made of green wood. I froze, half aching for some perceptive range so that I could dig any sign of danger, and half remembering that if it weren't for this dead area, I'd not be this far. I'd have been frightened to try it in a clear zone.

Eventually I went on up, and as my head came above the level of the floor, everything became psi-clear once more.

HERE was as neat a bit of home planning as I have ever seen. Just below the level of the second floor, their dead area faded out, so that the top floor was clean, bright, and clear as day. I paused, startled at it, spent a few moments digging outside. The dead area billowed above the rooftop out of my range; from what little I could survey of the dark psi area, it must have been shaped sort of like an angel-food cake, except that the central hole did not go all the way down. Only to the first-floor level. It was a wonderful set-up for a

home; privacy was granted on the first floor and from the road and all the surrounding territory, but on the second floor there was plenty of pleasant esper-clear space for the close-knit family and friends. Their dead area was shaped in the ideal form for any ideal home.

Then I stopped complimenting the architect and went on about my business, because there, directly in front of my nose, I could dig the familiar impression of a medical office.

I went the rest of the way up the stairs and into the medical office. There was no mistake. The usual cabinets full of instruments, a laboratory examination table, shelves of little bottles, and along one wall was a library of medical books. All it needed was a sign on the door: 'So and So, M. Sch.' to make it standard.

At the end of the library was a set of looseleaf notebooks, and I pulled the more recent of them out and held it up to my face. I did not dare snap on a light, so I had to go it esper.

Even in the clear area, this told me very little. Esper is not like eyesight, any more than you can hear printed words or perhaps carry on a conversation by watching the wiggly green line on an oscilloscope. I wished it was. Instead, esper gives you a grasp of

materials and shapes and things in position with regard to other things. It is sort of like seeing something simultaneously from all sides, if you can imagine such a sensation. So instead of being able to esper-read the journal, I had to take it letter by letter by digging the shape of the ink on the page with respect to the paper and the other letters, and since the guy's handwriting was atrocious, I could get no more than if the thing were written in Latin. If it had been typewritten, or with a stylized hand, it would have been far less difficult; or perhaps if it had been any of my damned business I could have dug it. But as it was—

"Looking for something, Mr. Cornell?" asked a cool voice that dripped with acid sarcasm. At the same instant, the lights went on.

I whirled clutched at my hip pocket, and dropped to my knees at the same time. The sights of my .375 centered in the middle of a silk-covered midriff.

She stood there indolently, disdainful of the cannon that was aimed at her. She was not armed; I think that I'd have caught the esper warning of danger if she'd come at me with a weapon of some sort, even though I was preoccupied instead of sloping with the bookfull of evidence.

I stood up and faced her and let my esper run lightly over her body.

She was another Mekstrom, which did not surprise me a bit.

"I seem to have found what I was looking for," I said.

Her laugh was scornful but not loud. "You're welcome, Mr. Cornell."

Telepath?

"Yes, and a good one."

Who else is awake?

"Just me, so far," she replied quietly. "But I'll be glad to call out—"

Keep it quiet, Sister Macklin.

"Stop thinking like an idiot, Mr. Cornell. Quiet or not, you'll not leave this house until I permit you to go."

I let my esper roam quickly through the house. An elderly couple slept in the front bedroom. A man slept alone in the room beside them; a pair of young boys slept in an over-and-under bunk in the room across the hall. The next room must have been hers, the bed was tumbled but empty. The room next to the medical office contained a man trussed in traction splints, white bandages, and literally festooned with those little hanging bottles that contain everything from blood plasma to food and water, right on down to lubrication for the joints. I tried to dig his face under the swathe of bandages but I couldn't make out much more than the fact that it was a face and that the face was half

Mekstrom Flesh.

"He is a Mekstrom Patient," said Miss Macklin quietly. "At this stage, he is unconscious."

I sort of sneered at her. "Good friend of yours, no doubt."

"Not particularly," she said. "Let's say that he is a poor victim that would die if we hadn't found his infection early." The tone and expression of her voice made me seethe; she sounded as though she felt herself to be a real benefactor to the human race, and that she and her outfit would do the same for any other poor bugger that caught Mekstrom's — providing they learned about this unfortunate occurrence in time.

"We would, Mr. Cornell."

"Bah-loney," I grunted.

"Why dispute my word?" she asked in the same tone of innocent honesty.

I eyed her angrily and I felt my hand tighten on the revolver. "I've a reason to become suspicious," I told her in a voice that I hoped was as mild-mannered as her own. "Because three people have disappeared without a trace in the past half-year, but under circumstances that put me in the middle. All of them, somehow, seem to be involved with your hidden road sign system and Mekstrom's Disease."

"That's unfortunate," she said

quietly.

I had to grab myself to keep from yelling, "Unfortunate?" and managed to muffle it down to a mere voice-volume sound. "People dying of Mekstrom's because you're keeping this cure a secret and I'm batted from pillar to post because—" I gave up on that because I really did not know why.

"It's unfortunate that you had to become involved," she said firmly. "Because you—"

"It's unfortunate for everybody," I snapped, "because I'm going to bust you all wide open!"

"I'm afraid not. You see, in order to do that you'll have to get out of here and that I will not permit."

I grunted. "Miss Macklin, you Mekstroms have hard bodies, but do you think your hide will stop a slug from this?"

"Not at all. But you see, Mr. Cornell, you do not have the cold, brittle, determined guts that you'd need to pull that trigger."

"No?"

"Pull it," she said. "Or do you agree, now that you're of age, that you can't bluff a telepath."

I eyed her sourly because she was right. She held that strength that lies in weakness; I could not pull that trigger and blow a .375 inch hole through that slender, silk-covered midriff because I knew that if I did, my life would not be

worth the spent slug that came out of the other side of her. And opposite that, Miss Macklin also had a strength that was strength itself. I had no doubt that she could hold me aloft with one hand while I kicked and squirmed while she was twisting my arms and legs off with her other hand.

She held all the big cards of her sex, too. I couldn't slug her with my fist, even though I knew that I'd only break my hand without even bruising her. I was in an awkward situation and I knew it. If she'd been a normal woman I could have shrugged my way past her and left, but she was determined not to let me leave without a lot of physical violence. Violence committed on a woman gets the man in dutch no matter how justified he is. Also, I had enough people on my neck as it was.

Yet in my own weakness there was a strength; there was another way out and I took it. Abruptly and without forethought.

CHAPTER X

SHIFTING my aim slightly, I pulled the trigger. The .375 Bonanza went off with a sound like an atom bomb in a telephone booth, and the slug whiffed between her arm and her body and drilled a crater in the plaster behind her.

The roar stunned her stiff. The color drained from her face and she swayed uncertainly. I found time enough to observe that while her body was as hard as chromium, her nervous system was still human and sensitive enough to make her faint from a sudden shock. She caught herself, and stood there stiff and white with one delicate (but steel-hard) hand up against her throat.

Then I dug the household. They were piling out of the hay like a bunch of trained firemen answering a still alarm. They arrived in all stages of nightdress in the following order:

The man, about twenty-two or three, who skidded into the room on a dead gallop and put on the brakes with a screech as he caught sight of the .375 with its thin wisp of blue vapor still trailing out of the muzzle.

The twins, aged about fourteen, who might have turned to run if they'd not been frightened stiff at the sight of the cannon in my fist.

Father and then Mother Macklin, who came in briskly but without panic.

Mr. Maacklin said, crisply, "May I have an explanation, Mr. Cornell?"

"I'm a cornered rat," I said thickly. "And so I'm scared. I want out of here in one piece. I'm so scared that if I'm intercepted, I

may get panicky, and if I do someone is likely to get hurt. Understand?"

"Perfectly," said Mr. Macklin calmly.

"Are you going to let him get away with this?" snapped the eldest son.

"Fred, a nervous man with a revolver is very dangerous. Especially one who lacks the rudimentary training in the simpler forms of burglary."

I couldn't help but admire the older gentleman's bland self-confidence. "Young man," he said to me, "You've made a bad mistake."

"No I haven't," I snapped. "I've been on the trail of something concrete for a long time, now, and now that I've found it I'm not going to let it go easily." I waved the .375 and they all cringed but Mr. Macklin.

He said, "Please put that weapon down, Mr. Cornell. Let's not add murder to your other crimes."

"Don't force me to it, then. Get out of my way and let me go."

He smiled. "I would not have to be telepath to tell you that you won't pull that trigger until you're sorely driven," he replied calmly. He was so goddamned right that it made me mad at myself. He added to it, "Also, you've got four shells left since you carry the firearm on an empty chamber. Not used to guns, are you, Mr. Cornell?"

Well, I wasn't used to wearing a gun. Now that he mentioned it, I remembered that it was impossible to fire the shell under the hammer by any means except by pulling the trigger.

What he was telling me meant that even if I made a careful but bloody sweep of it with my four shells, there would be two of them left, and that even the twins were more than capable of taking me apart inch by inch once my revolver was empty.

"Seems to be an impasse, Mr. Cornell," he said with an amused smile.

"You bland mannered bunch of——"

"Ah now, please," he said abruptly. "My wife is not accustomed to such language, nor is my daughter, although my son and the twins probably know enough definitions to make them angry. This is an impasse, Mr. Cornell, and it behooves all of us to be extremely polite to one another. For one wrong move and you'll fire; this will mean complete chaos for all of us. One wrong word from you and some one of us will take offense, which will be equally fatal. Now, let's all stand quietly and talk this over."

"What's to talk over?" I demanded.

"A truce. Or call it an armistice."

"Do go on."

HE looked at his family, and I followed his gaze. Miss Macklin was leaning against the wall with a look of concentrated interest. Her elder brother, Fred, was standing alert and ready but not quite poised for a leap. Mrs. Macklin had a motherly-looking smile on her face which for some unknown reason she was aiming at me in a disarming manner. The twins were standing close together, both of them puzzled-looking. I remembered that kids of that age haven't been given the fine polish of psi schooling yet and whether they were esper or telepath (Twins are always the same when they're identical, and for some reason, they're always opposite when they're fraternal) they did not have enough of what it took to deep-dig what was going on. The thing that really bothered me was their attitude. They all seemed to look at me as though I were a poor misguided individual who had unwittingly tromped on their toes after having fallen in among bad company. They reminded me of the Harrisons, who looked and sounded so sympathetic when I'd gone out there seeking Catherine.

A fine bunch to trust! First they swipe my girl and erase all traces of her; then when I go looking they offer me help and

sympathy for my distress. The right hand giveth and the left hand taketh away, yeah!

I hated them all, yet I am not a hero-type. I wanted the whole Highways In Hiding rolled up like an old discarded corridor carpet, and every damned Mekstrom on Earth rolled up in it. But even if I'd been the hero-type, filled to the scuppers with self-abnegation in favor of my fellow man, I could not have pulled the trigger and started the shambles. For instead of blowing the whole thing wide open because of a batch of bodies, the survivors would have enough savvy to clean up the mess before our bodies got cold, and the old Highways crowd would be doing business at the same old stand. Without, I might add, without the minor nuisance that people call Steve Cornell.

What I really wanted was to find Catherine.

And then it came to me that what I really wanted second of all was to possess a body of Mekstrom Flesh, to be a physical superman.

"Suppose," said Miss Macklin unexpectedly, "that it is impossible?"

"Impossible?" I roared. "What have you got that I haven't got?"

"Mekstrom's Disease," replied Miss Macklin quietly.

"Fine," I sneered. "So how do

I go out and get it?"

"You'll get it naturally—or not at all," she said.

"Now see here——" I started off, but Mr. Macklin stopped me with an upraised hand.

"Mr. Cornell," he said, "we are in the very awkward position of trying to convince a man that his preconceived notion is incorrect. We can produce no direct evidence to support our statement. All we can do is to tell you that so far as we know, and as much as we know, about Mekstrom's Disease, no one has ever contracted the infection artificially."

"And how can I believe you?"

"That's our awkward position. We cannot show you anything that will support our statement. We can profess the attitudes of honesty, truth, honor, good-will, altruism, and every other word that means the same thing. We can talk until doomsday and nothing will be said. A man who swears to being a bank robber, thief, extortionist, or anything else is believed much faster than any man who tries to swear that he is honest, et-cetera. The political appellation 'Honest John' implied a slightly snide ring whereas the term 'Machine Gun Jack' or 'Light Fingered Joe' are relatively more honest nomenclature."

"So where is all this getting us?" I asked.

"I hope it is beginning to cause your mind to doubt the preconceived notion," he said. "Ask yourself why any outfit such as ours would deliberately show you evidence."

"I have and it does not make sense."

He smiled. "Precisely. It does not."

Fred Macklin interrupted, "Look Dad, why are we bothering with all this guff?"

"Because I have hopes that Mr. Cornell can be made to see our point, to join, as it were, our side."

"Fat chance," I snapped.

"Please, I'm your elder and not at all inclined to waste my time. You came here seeking information and you shall have it. You will not believe it, but it will, I hope, fill in some blank spots after you have had a chance to compare, sort, and use your own logic on the problem. As a mechanical engineer, you are familiar with the line of reasoning that we non-engineering people call Occam's Razor?"

"The law of least reaction," I said automatically.

"The what?" asked Mrs. Macklin.

Miss Macklin said, "I'll read it from Mr. Cornell's mind, mother. The law of least reaction can be demonstrated by the following: If a bucket of mixed wood-shavings

and gasoline are heated, there is a calculable probability that the gasoline will catch fire first because the gasoline is easier—least reaction—to set on fire."

"Right" I said. "But how does this apply to me?"

MR. Macklin took up the podium again: "For one thing, your assumption regarding Catherine is correct. At the time of the accident she was found to have Mekstrom's Disease in its earliest form. The Harrisons did take her in to save her life. Now, dropping that side of the long story, we must follow your troubles. The accident, to a certain group of persons was a fortunate one. It placed under their medical care a man—you—in whose mind had been planted a certain mild curiosity about a peculiar road sign. Other evidences were planted by one of their number, and the upshot of this was that you took off on a tour of investigation."

That sounded logical, but there were a lot of questions that had open, ragged ends flying loose.

Mr. Macklin went on: "Let's diverge for the moment. Mr. Cornell, what is your reaction to Mekstrom's Disease at this point?"

That was easy. It was a curse to the human race, excepting that some outfit knew how to cure it. But once cured, it made a physical

superman of the so-called victim. What stuck in my craw was the number of unfortunate bastards that caught it and died painfully—or by their own hand in horror—without the sign of aid or assistance.

He nodded when I'd gone halfway through my conclusions and before I got mentally violent about them.

"Mr. Cornell, you've expressed your own doom at certain hands. You feel that the human race could benefit by exploitation of Mekstrom's Disease."

"It could, if everybody helped out and worked together."

"Everybody?" he asked with a sly look. I yearned again for the ability of a telepath, and I knew now that the reason why I was running around loose was because I was only an esper and therefore incapable of learning the truth directly. I stood there like a totem pole and tried to think.

Eventually it occurred to me. Just as there are people who cannot stand dictatorships, there are others who cannot abide democracy; in any aggregation like the human race there will be the warped souls who feel superior to the rest of humanity. They welcome dictatorship providing they can be among the dictators and if they are not included, they fight until the other dictatorship is de-

posed so that they can take over.

"True," said Mr. Macklin. "And yet, if they declared their intentions, how long would they last?"

"Not very long. Not until they had enough power to make it stick," I said.

"And above all, not until they have the power to grant this blessing to those whose minds agree with theirs. So now, Mr. Cornell, I'll make a statement that you can accept as a mere collection of words, to be used in your arguments with yourself: We'll assume two groups, one working to set up a hierarchy of Mekstroms (to use your own definition for us) in which the rest of the human race will become hewers of wood and drawers of water. Contrasting that group is another group who feel that no man or even a congress of men are capable of picking and choosing the individual who is to be granted the body of the physical superman. We cannot hope to watch the watchers, Mr. Cornell, and we will not have on our conscience the weight of having to select A over B as being more desirable. Enough of this. You'll have to argue it out by yourself later."

"Later?" grunted Fred Macklin. "You're not going to—"

"I certainly am," said his father firmly. "Mr. Cornell may get trapped, yet he may be the agency

whereby we succeed in winning out." He spoke to me again. "Neither group dares to come into the open, Mr. Cornell. We cannot accuse the other group of anything nefarious, any more than they dare to accuse us. Their mode of attack is to coerce you into exposing us for a group of undercover operators who are making supermen."

"Look," I asked him, "why not admit it? You've got nothing sinister in mind."

"Think of all the millions of people who have not had schooling beyond the preparatory grades," he said. "People of latent psi ability instead of trained practice, or those poor souls who have no psi ability worth mentioning. Do you know the history of the Rhine Institute, Mr. Cornell?"

"Only vaguely."

"In the early days of Rhine's work at Duke University, there were many scoffers. The scoffers and detractors, naturally enough, were those people who had the least amount of psi ability; admitting that at that time all psi ability was latent, they still had less of it. But after Rhine's death, his associates managed to prove his theories and eventually worked out a system of training that would develop the psi ability. Then, Mr. Cornell, those who were blessed with a high ability in telepathy or perception—the common term of

esper is a misnomer, you know, because there's nothing extra-sensory about perception—found themselves being suspected, disliked, and even hated by those who had not this delicate sense. It took forty or fifty years before the common public acceptance got around to looking at telepathy and perception in about the same light as they saw a musician with a trained ear or an artist with a trained eye. Psi is a talent that everybody has to some degree, and today this is accepted with very little angry jealousy.

"But now," he went on thoughtfully, "consider what would happen if we made a public announcement that we could cure Mektrom's Disease by making a physical superman out of the poor victim. Our main enemy would then stand up righteously and howl that we are concealing the secret; he would be believed. We would be tracked down and persecuted, eventually wiped out, while he sat behind his position and went on picking and choosing victims whose attitude parallel his own."

"And who is the character?" I demanded. I knew. But I wanted him to say it aloud.

HE shook his head. "I'll not say it," he said. "Because I will not accuse him aloud, any more than he dares to tell you flatly that we are an underground organiza-

tion that must be rooted out. He knows about our highways and our way stations and our cure, because he uses the same cure. He can hide behind his position so long as he makes no direct accusation. You know the law, Mr. Cornell."

Yes, I knew the law. Any man of unsullied reputation could not be accused of anything unless the accuser himself was willing to submit to a court of preliminary inquiry. So long as the accuser came into court with a completely clean mind, he was safe. But Scholar Phelps could hardly make the accusation, nor could he supply the tiniest smidgin of direct evidence to me. For in my accusation I'd implicate him as an accessory-accuser and then he would be called upon to supply not only evidence but a clear, clean, and open mind. In shorter words, the old stunt of pointing loudly to someone else as a dodge for covering up your own crime was a lost art in this present-day world of telepathic competence. The law, of course, insisted that no man could be convicted for what he was thinking, but only upon direct evidence of action. But a crooked-thinking witness found himself in deep trouble anyway, even though crooked thought was in itself no crime.

"Now for one more item," said Mr. Macklin. "Consider a medical person who cannot qualify because

he is a telepath and not a perceptive. His very soul was devoted to being a scholar of medicine like his father and his grandfather, but his telepath ability does not allow him to be the full scholar. A doctor he can be. But he can never achieve the final training, gain the ultimate degree. Such a man overcompensates and becomes the frustrate; a ripe disciple for the superman theory."

"Dr. Thorndyke!" I blurted.

His face was as blank and non-committal as a bronze bust; I could neither detect affirmation nor negation in it. He was playing it flat; I'd never get any evidence from him, either.

"So now, Mr. Cornell, I have given you food for thought. I've made no direct statements; nothing that you could point to. I've defended myself as any man will do, but only by protestations of innocence. Therefore I suggest that you take your artillery and vacate the premises."

I remembered the Bonanza .375 that was hanging in my hand. Shamefacedly I slipped it back in my hip pocket. "But look, sir—"

"Please leave, Mr. Cornell. Any more I cannot say without laying us wide open for trouble. I am sorry for you, it is no joy being a pawn. But I hope that your pawnship will work for our side, and I hope that you will come through it safely.

Now, please leave us quietly."

I shrugged. I left. And as I was leaving, Miss Macklin touched my arm and said in a soft voice: "I hope you find your Catherine, Steve. And I hope that someday you'll be able to join her."

I nodded dumbly. It was not until I was all the way back to my car that I remembered that her last statement was something similar to wishing me a mild case of measles so that I'd be afterward immune from them.

CHAPTER XI

AS the miles separated me from the Macklins, my mind kept whirling around in a tight circle. I had a lot of the bits, but none of them seemed to lock together very tight. And unhappily, too many of the bits that fit together were hunks that I did not like.

I knew the futility of being non-telepath. Had Mr. Macklin given me the truth or was I being sold another shoddy bill of goods? Or had he spun me a yarn just to get me out of his house without a riot? Of course, there had been a riot, and he'd been expecting it. If nothing else, it proved that I was a valuable bit of material, for some undisclosed reason.

I had to grin. I didn't know the reason, but whatever reason they had, it must gripe the devil out of

them to be unable to erase me.

Then the grin faded. No one had told me about Catherine. They'd neatly avoided the subject. Well, since I'd taken off on this still hunt to find Catherine, I'd continue looking, even though every corner I looked into turned out to be the hiding place for another bunch of mad spooks.

My mind took another tack: Admitting that neither side could rub me out without losing, why in hell didn't they just collect me and put me in a cage? Dammit, if I had an organization as well oiled as either of them, I could collect the President right out of the New White House and put him in a cage along with the king of England, the Shah of Persia, and the Viceroy of India to make a fourth for bridge.

This was one of those questions that cannot be answered by the application of logic, reasoning, or by applying either experience or knowledge. I did not know, nor understand. And the only way I would ever find out what was cooking was to locate someone who did know. And who was willing to tell.

Then it occurred to me that—aside from my one experience in housebreaking—that I'd been playing according to the rules. I'm pretty much a law-abiding citizen. I'll not defend nor explain my attitude because it is not germane to

the issue, but I am. Yet it did seem to me that I learned more during those times when the rules, if not broken, at least were bent rather sharply.

So I decided to try my hand at busting a couple of rather high-level rules.

There was a way to track down Catherine, perhaps. If it worked, I'd have busted not only the rules of ethical privacy, but also the legal ones.

So I gassed up the buggy, turned the nose east, and took off like a man with a purpose in mind. En route, I laid out my course. Along that course there turned out to be seven Way Stations, according to the Highway signs. Three of them were along U. S. 12 on the way from Yellowstone to Chicago. One of them was between Chicago and Hammond, Indiana. There was another to the south of Sandusky, Ohio, one was somewhere above Scranton and the last was in the vicinity of Newark. There were a lot of the Highways themselves, leading into and out of my main route—as well as along it.

But I ignored them all, and nobody gave me a rough time.

Eventually I walked into my apartment. It was musty, dusty, and lonesome. Some of Catherine's things were still on the table where I'd dropped them; they looked up at me mutely until I covered them

with the walloping pile of mail that had arrived in my long absence. I got a bottle of beer and began to go through the mail, wastebasketing the advertisements, piling the magazines neatly, and filing some offers of jobs (which reminded me that I was still an engineer with a M. Ing degree and that my funds wouldn't last indefinitely) and went on through the mail until I came to a letter—The Letter.

Dear Mr. Cornell:

We're glad to hear from you. We moved, not because Marian caught Mekstrom's, but because the dead area shifted and left us sort of living in a fishbowl, psi-wise.

Everybody is hale and hearty here and we all wish you the best.

Please do not think for a moment that you owe us anything. We'd rather be free of your so called debt. We regret that Catherine was not with you, maybe the accident might not have happened. But we do all think that we will forever stand as an association with a very unhappy period in your life, and that it will be better for you if you try to forget that we exist. This is a hard thing to say, Steve, but really, all we can do for you is to remind you of your troubles.

Therefore with love from all of us, we'd like to make this a sincerely sympathetic and final—

Farewell

Phillip Harrison.

I grunted unhappily. It was a nice-sounding letter, but it did not ring true, somehow. I sat there digging it for hidden meanings, but none came.

I didn't care. In fact, I didn't really expect any more than this. If they'd not written me at all, I'd still have done what I did. I sat down and wrote Phillip Harrison another letter:

Dear Phillip:

I received your letter today, as I returned from an extended trip through the west. I'm glad to hear that Marian is not suffering from Mekstrom's Disease. I am told that it is fatal to the—uninitiated.

However, I hope to see you soon.

Regards,

Steve Cornell

That, I thought, should do it!

THEN to help me and my esper, I located a tiny silk handkerchief of Catherine's, one she'd left after one of her visits. I slipped it into the envelope and slapped a stamp and a notation on the envelope that this letter was to be forwarded to Phillip Harrison. I dropped it in the box about eleven that night, but I didn't bother trying to follow it until the morning.

Ultimately it was picked up and taken to the local post office, and from there it went to the clear-

ing station at Pennsylvania Station at 34th St., where I hung around the mail-baggage section until I attracted the attention of a policeman.

"Looking for something, Mr. Cornell?"

"Not particularly," I told the telepath cop. "Why?"

"You've been digging every mail-bag that comes out of there."

"Am I?" I asked ingenuously.

"Can it Buster, or we'll let you dig your way out of a jail."

"You can't arrest a man for thinking."

"I'll be happy to make it for loitering," he said sharply.

"I've a train ticket."

"Use it, then."

"Sure. At train time I'll use it."

"Which train? he asked me sourly. "You've missed three already."

"I'm waiting for a special train, officer."

"Then please go and wait in the bar, Mr. Cornell."

"Okay. I'm sorry I caused you any trouble, but I've a bit of a personal problem. It isn't illegal."

"Anything that involves taking a perceptive dig at the U. S. Mail is illegal," said the policeman. "Personal or not, it's out. So either you stop digging or else."

I left. There was no sense in arguing with the cop. I'd just end up short. So I went to the bar and I found out why he'd recom-

mended it. It was in a sort of faintly-dead area, not really dead but hazy enough to prevent me from taking a squint at the baggage section. I had a couple of fast ones, but I couldn't stand the suspense of not knowing when my letter might take off without me.

Since I'd also pushed my loitering-luck I gave up. The only thing I could hope for was that the sealed forwarding address had been made out at that little town near the Harrisons and hadn't been moved. So I went and took a train that carried no mail.

It made my life hard. I had to wander around that tank town for hours, keeping a blanket-perceptive watch on the post office for either the income or the outgo of my precious hunk of mail. I caught some hard eyes from the local yokels but eventually I discovered that my luck was with me.

A fast train whiffled through the town and they hooked a mailbag off the car on one of those baggage hooks at about a hundred and fifty per. I found out that the next stop of that train was Albany. I'd have been out of luck if I'd hoped to follow the bag.

Then came another period of haunting that dinky post office (I've mentioned before that it was in a dead area, so I couldn't watch the inside, only the exits) until at long last I perceived my favorite

bit of mail emerging in another bag. It was carted to the railroad station and hung up on another pick-up hook. I bought a ticket back to New York and sat on a bench near the hook, probing into the bag as hard as my sense of perception could dig.

I cursed the whole world. The bag was merely labelled "Forwarding Mail" in letters that could be seen at ninety feet. My own letter, of course, I could read very well, to every dotted 'i' and crossed 't' and the stitching in Catherine's little kerchief. But I could not make out the address printed on the form that was pasted across the front of the letter itself.

For some reason known only to the Rhine Scholars, something that is no business of the perceptive is harder to read than something that is his business. This was an officially 'sealed' forwarding address. Therefore it was none of my business. And reading print is tough enough anyway. That doubled the difficulty into impossible.

As I sat there trying to probe that sealed address, a fast train came along and scooped the bag off the hook.

I caught the next train. I swore and I squirmed and I groaned because that damned train stopped at every wide spot in the road, paused to take on milk, swap cars,

and generally tried to see how long it could take to make a run of some forty miles. This was Fate. Naturally, any train that stopped at that rattleburg would also stop at every other point along the road where some pioneer had stopped to toss a beer bottle off of his covered wagon.

At long last I returned to Pennsylvania Station just in time to perceive my letter being loaded on a conveyor for LaGuardia.

Then the same damned policeman collared me.

"This is it," he said.

"Now see here, officer. I—"

"Will you come quietly, Mr. Cornell? Or shall I put the big stiff arm on you?"

"For what?"

"You've been violating the 'Disclosure' Act of the Federal Communications Act, and I know it."

"Now look, officer. I said this was not illegal."

"I'm not an idiot, Cornell!" I noted uncomfortably that he had dropped the formal address. "You have been trailing a specific piece of mail with the express purpose of find out where it is going. Since its destination is a sealed forwarding address, your attempt to determine this destination is a violation of the act." He eyed me coldly as if to dare me to deny it. "Now," he finished, "shall I read you chapter and verse?"

He had me cold. The 'Disclosure' Act was an old F. C. C. ruling (Upheld by Law) that any transmission must not be used for the benefit of any handler. When Rhine came along, the 'Disclosure' Act was extended to everything.

"Look officer, it's my girl," I said, hoping that would make a difference.

"I know that," he told me flatly. "Which is why I'm not running you in. I'm just telling you to lay off. Your girl went away and left you a sealed forwarding address. Maybe she doesn't want to see you again."

"She's sick," I said.

"Maybe her family thinks you made her sick. Now stop it and go away. And if I ever find you trying to dig the mail again, you'll dig iron bars. Now scat!"

He urged me towards the outside of the station like a sheepdog hazing his flock. I took a cab to LaGuardia, even though it was not as fast as the subway. I was glad to be out of his presence.

I connected with my letter again at LaGuardia. It was being loaded aboard a DC-16 headed for Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Hawaii, and Manila. I didn't know how far it was going so I bought a ticket for the route with my travel card and I got aboard just ahead of the closing door.

My bit of mail was in the compartment below me, and in the hour

travel time to Chicago, I found out that Chicago was the destination for the mailbag, although the superscript on the letter was still hazy.

I followed the bag off the plane at Chicago and stopped long enough to cancel the rest of my ticket. There was no use wasting the money for the unused fare from Chicago to Manila. I rode into the city in a combination bus-truck less than six feet from my little point-of-interest. During the ride I managed to dig the superscript.

It forwarded the letter to Ladysmith, Wisconsin, and from there to a rural route that I couldn't understand although I got the number.

Then I went back to Midway Airport and found to my disgust that the Chicago Airport did not have a bar. I dug into this oddity for a moment until I found out that the Chicago Airport, for some reason, was built on Public School Property and that according to law, they couldn't sell anything harder than soda pop within three hundred feet of public school property, no matter who rented it. So I dawdled in the bar across Cicero Avenue until plane time, and took an old propeller-driven Convair to Eau Claire on a daisy-clipping ride that stopped at every lake on the course. From Eau Claire the mail bag took off in the antediluvian Convair but I took it by train because the bag

was scheduled to be dropped by guided glider into Ladysmith.

At Ladysmith I rented a car, checked the rural routes, and took off about the same time as my significant hunk of mail.

NINE miles from Ladysmith is a flagstop called Bruce, and not far from Bruce there is a body of water slightly larger than a duck pond called Caley Lake.

A backroad, decorated with ornamental metal signs, led me from Bruce, Wisconsin, to Caley Lake, where the road signs showed a missing spoke.

I turned in, feeling like Ferdinand and Magellan must have felt when he finally made his passage through the Strait to discover the open sea that lay beyond the New World. I had done a fine job of tailing and I wanted someone to pin a leather medal on me. The side road wound in and out for a few hundred yards, and then I saw Phillip Harrison.

He was poking a long tool into the guts of an automatic pump, built to lift water from a deep well into a water tower about forty feet tall. He did not notice my arrival until I stopped my rented car beside him and said:

"Being a mechanical engineer and an esper, Phil, I can tell you that you have a—"

"A worn gasket seal," he said. "It doesn't take an esper engineer

to figure it out. How the hell did you find us?"

"Out in your mailbox there is a letter," I told him. "I came with it."

He eyed me humorously. "How much postage did you cost? Or did you come second class mail?"

I was not sure that I cared for the inference, but Phillip was kidding me by the half-smile on his face. I asked, "Phil, please tell me — what in the Holy Hell is going on?"

His half-smile faded. He shook his head unhappily as he said, "You poor unfortunate bastard, why can't you leave well-enough alone?"

My feelings welled up and I blew my scalp. "Let well enough alone?" I roared. "I'm pushed from pillar to post by everybody. You steal my girl. I'm in hokus with the cops, and then you tell me that I'm to stay—"

"Up the proverbial estuary lacking the customary means of locomotion," he finished with a smile.

I couldn't see the humor in it. "Yeah," I drawled humorlessly.

"You realize that you're probably as big a liability with us as you were trying to find us?"

I grunted. "I could always blow my brains out."

"That's no solution and you know it."

"Then give me an alternative."

Phillip shrugged. "Now that you're here, you're here. It's obvious that you know too much, Steve. You should have left well enough alone."

"I didn't know well enough. Besides, I couldn't have been pushed better if someone had slipped me—" I stopped, stunned at the idea and then I went on in a falter, "— a post-hypnotic suggestion."

"Steve, you'd better come in and meet Marian. Maybe that's what happened."

"Marian?" I said hollowly.

"She's a high-grade telepath. Master of psi, no less."

My mind went red as I remembered how I'd catalogued her physical charms on our first meeting in an effort to find out whether she were esper or telepath. Marian Henderson had fine control; her mind must have positively seethed at my invasion of her privacy. I did not want to meet Marian face to face right now, but there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

Phillip left his pump and waved for me to follow. He took off in his jeep and I trailed him to the farmhouse. We went through a dim area that was almost the ideal shape for a home. The ring was not complete, but the open part faced the fields behind the house so that good privacy was insured for all practical purposes.

On the steps of the verandah

stood Marian.

Sight of her was enough to make me forget my self-accusation of a few moments ago. She stood tall and lissome, the picture of slender, robust health. She was dressed as she had been before, but in cloth of a different color. The shorts were very short and wash-faded. The bra was—again—hardly heavy enough to wear for receiving company, but far too heavy to be underwear. Her long legs tapered down into sandals that showed off her ankles. Her white teeth gleamed against the tanned skin as she smiled at me with amusement.

"Come in, Steve," she said holding out her hand. I took it. Her grip was firm and hard, but it was gentle. I knew that she could have pulped my hand if she squeezed hard.

"I'm very happy to see that rumor is wrong and that you're not—suffering—from Mekstrom's Disease," I told her.

"So now you know, Steve. Too bad."

"Why?"

"Because it adds a load to all of us. Even you." She looked at Phillip thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "Well, come on in and relax, Steve. We'll talk it out."

We all went inside.

On a divan in the living room, covered by a light blanket, resting in a very light snooze, was a

woman. Her face was turned away from me, but the hair and the line of the figure and the—

Catherine!

She turned and sat up at once, alive and shook awake. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes with swift knuckles and then looked over her hands at me.

"Steve!" she cried, and all the world and soul of her was in the throb of her voice.

CHAPTER XII

CATHERINE took one unsteady step towards me and then came forward with a rush. She hurled herself into my arms, pressed herself against me, held me tight.

It was like being attacked by a bulldozer.

Phillip stayed my back against her headlong rush or I would have been thrown back out through the door, across the verandah, and into the middle of the yard. The strength of her crushed my chest and wrenched my spine. Her lips crushed mine. I began to black out from the physical hunger of a woman who did not know the extent of her new-found body. All that Catherine remembered was that once she held me to the end of her strength and yearned for more strength. To hold me that way now meant—death.

Her body was the same slenderness, but the warm softness was gone. It was a flesh-warm waist of flexible-steel. I was being held by a statue of bronze, animated by monster servo-mechanisms. This was no woman.

Phillip and Marian pried her away from me before she broke my back. Phillip led her away, whispering softly in her ear. Marian carried me to the divan and let me down on my face gently. Her hands were gentle as she pressed the air back into my lungs and soothed away the awful wrench in my spine. Gradually I came alive again, but there was pain left that made me gasp at every breath.

Then the physical hurt went away, leaving only the mental pain; the horror of knowing that the girl that I loved could never hold me in her arms. I shuddered. All that I wanted out of this life was married love with Catherine, and now that I had found her again, I had to face the fact that the first embrace of passion would kill me. Regardless of the famous wise-crack, it is not a pleasant way to die.

Hell, I thought, There isn't hard strength enough in me to give her the first fragment of physical satisfaction. And she'd kill me trying—

"No no, Steve!" cried Catherine. "No, Steve. I can be gentle."

She could be gentle! How the hell long can a love affair or a mar-

riage last when one-half of the couple must retain enough cold logic to remember that the other half is fragile. Or when the weak knows that the best he can do is not enough to command the full and entire attention of the other. This is the living hell of the duty marriage.

I've known three of them so far. It has been sheer hell for all six of them. One, strong and healthy, married to Two, an invalid. Man or woman makes no difference. The healthy one is denied the outlet of a normal life because of the codes of convention, honor, and law. The invalid spends a lifetime cursing fate and hating the resentment that must be growing in the other and wishing for some honorable way out.

This is what Catherine expected me to face?

Not Steve Cornell!

Yet I cursed my fate just as any invalid has cursed the malady that makes him a responsibility and a burden to his partner instead of a joy and a helpmeet. Like the helpless, I didn't want it; I hadn't asked for it; nor as far as I could see I hadn't earned it. Yet all I could do is to rail against the unfairness of the unwarranted punishment.

Without knowing that I was asking, I cried out, "But why?" in a plaintive voice.

IN a gentle tone, Marian replied: "Steve, you cannot blame yourself. Catherine was lost to you before you met her at her apartment that evening. What she thought to be a callous on her small toe was really the initial infection of Mekstrom's Disease. We're all sensitive to Mekstrom's Disease. Steve. So when you cracked up, and Dad and Phil went on the dead run to help, they caught a perception of it. Naturally we had to help her."

I must have looked bitter.

"Look, Steve," said Phillip slowly, "You wouldn't have wanted us not to help? After all, would you want Catherine to stay with you? So that you could watch her die at the rate of a sixty-fourth of an inch each hour?"

"Hell," I snarled, "Someone might have let me know."

Phillip shook his head. "We couldn't Steve. You've got to understand our viewpoint."

"Damn your viewpoint!" I roared angrily. "Has anybody ever stopped to consider mine?" I did not give a hoot that they could wind me around a doorknob and tuck my feet in the keyhole. Sure, I was grateful for their aid to Catherine. But why didn't someone stop to think of the poor beknighted bastard who was in the accident ward all busted up. The bird that had been traipsing all over hell's footstool trying to get a

line on his lost sweetheart. I'd been through the grinder; questioned by the F. B. I. suspected by the police; and I'd been the guy who'd been asked by a grieving, elderly couple, "But can't you remember, son?" Them and their stinking point of view!

"Easy, Steve," warned Phillip Harrison.

"Easy nothing! What possible justification have you for putting me through my jumps?"

"Look, Steve. We're in a precarious position. We're fighting a battle against an unscrupulous enemy, an under cover battle, Steve. If we could get something on Phelps, we'd expose him and his Medical Center like that. Conversely, if we slip a millimeter, Phelps will clip us so hard that the sky will ring. He—damn him—has the Government on his side. Even though they don't know it. So now and then a person drops out of sight. Frequently they write their families, explaining their absence for this or that reason. And—"

"So who wrote me?" I demanded hotly.

He looked at me pointedly. "If we'd known about Catherine, she'd have—disappeared—leaving you a trite letter. But no one could think of a letter to explain her disappearance from an accident, Steve."

"Oh fine."

"Well, you'd still prefer to find her alive, wouldn't you?"

"Couldn't someone tell me?"

"And have you radiating the fact all over the Earth like a broadcasting station?"

"Why couldn't I have joined her — you —?"

He shook his head in the same way that a man shakes it when he is trying to explain *why* two plus two are four and not maybe five or three and a half. "Steve," he said, "You haven't got Mekstrom's Disease."

"How do I get it?" I demanded hotly.

"Nobody knows," he said unhappily. "If we did, we'd be providing the rest of the human race with indestructible bodies as fast as we could spread it and take care of them."

"But goddamnit, couldn't I have been told *something*?" I pleaded. I must have sounded like a hurt kitten.

Marian put her hand on my arm. "Steve," she said, "You'd have been smoothed over, maybe brought in to work for us in some dead area. But then you turned up acting dangerously for all of us."

"Who— me?"

"By the time you came out for your visit, you were dangerous to us."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me find out. Relax, will you Steve? I'd like to read you deep. Catherine, you come in with me."

"What are we looking for?"

"Traces of post-hypnotic suggestion. It'll be hard to find because there will be only traces of a plan, all put in so that it looks natural, logical reasoning."

Catherine looked doubtful. "When would they have the chance?" she asked.

"Thorndyke. In the hospital."

Catherine nodded and I relaxed. At the beginning I was very reluctant. I didn't mind Catherine digging into the dark and dusty corners of my mind, but Marian Harrison bothered me.

"Think of the accident, Steve," she said.

Then I managed to lull my reluctant mind by remembering that she was trying to help me. I relaxed mentally and physically and regressed back to the day of the accident. I found it hard even then to go through the love-play and sweet seriousness that went on between Catherine and me, knowing that Marian Harrison was a sort of mental spectator. But I fought down my reticence and went on with it.

I practically relived the accident. I found it easier to go through now that I'd found Catherine

again. It was sort of like a cleansing bath. I began to enjoy it. So I went through it to the bitter end and went on with my life and adventures right up to the present. Having come to the end, I stopped.

Marian looked at Catherine. "Did you get it?"

Silence. More silence. Then, "It seems dim. Almost incredulous that it could be—" with a trail-off into thought again.

Phillip snorted. "Make with the chin-music you two. The rest of us aren't telepaths, you know."

"Sorry," said Marian. "It's sort of complicated and hard to figure, you know. What seems to be the case is sort of like this," she went on in an uncertain tone, "We can't find any direct evidence of anything like hypnotic suggestion. The urge to follow what you call the Highways In Hiding is rather high for a mere bump of curiosity, but nothing definite. I think you were probably urged very gently. Catherine objects, saying that it would take a brilliant psycho-telepath to do a job delicate enough to produce the urge without showing the traces of the operation."

"Someone of scholar grade in both psychology and telepathy," said Catherine.

I thought it over for a moment. "It seems to me that whoever did it—if it was done—was well aware that a good part of this urge would

be generated by Catherine's total and inexplicable disappearance. You'd have saved yourselves a lot of trouble—and saved me a lot of heartache if you'd let me know something. God! Haven't you any feelings?"

Catherine looked at me from hurt eyes. "Steve," she said quietly, "A billion girls have sworn that they'd rather die than live without their one-and-only. I swore it too. But when your life's end is shown to you on a microscope slide, love becomes less important. What should I do? Just die? Painfully?"

That was handing it to me on a platter. It hurt like hell but still I am not chuckleheaded enough to insist that she come with me to die instead of leaving and living. What really hurt was not knowing.

"Steve," said Marian. "You know that we couldn't have told you the truth."

"Yeah," I agreed disconsolately.

"Let's suppose that Catherine wrote you a letter telling you that she was alive and safe, but that she'd reconsidered the marriage. You were to forget her and all that. What happens next?"

Unhappily I told him. "I'd not have believed it."

Phillip nodded. "Next would have been a telepath-esper team. Maybe a perceptive with a temporal sense who could retrace that letter back to the point of origin,

teamed up with a telepath strong enough to drill a hole through the dead area that surrounds New Washington. Why, even before Rhine Institute, it was sheer folly for a runaway to write a letter. What would it be now?"

I nodded. What he said was true, but it did not ease the hurt.

"Then on the other hand," he went on in a more cheerful vein, "Let's take another look at us and you, Steve. Tell me, fellow, where are you now?"

I looked up at him. Phillip was smiling in a knowing-superior sort of manner. I looked at Marian. She was half-smiling. Catherine looked satisfied. I got it.

"Yeah. I'm here."

"You're here without having any letters, without leaving any broad trail of suspicion upon yourself. You've not disappeared, Steve. You've been a-running up and down the country all on your own decision. Where you go and what you do is your own business and nobody is going to set up a hue and cry after you. Sure, it took a lot longer this way. But it was a lot safer." He grinned wide then as he went on, "And if you'd like to take some comfort out of it, just remember all the time that you've shown yourself to be quite capable, filled with dogged determination, and ultimately successful."

He was right. In fact, if I'd tried

the letter-following stunt long earlier, I'd have been here a lot sooner.

SOMEHOW it seemed almost similar to a story I'd heard about coded messages during one of the big wars of the early part of the Century. The story is probably as apocryphal as all hell but it makes good sense even if it is not true. Seems that the business of sending coded messages is a hazardous one at best since all military operations include a large 'black chamber' which does nothing but decode messages intercepted from the enemy. Using the same code twice is fatal. So they used to make up a code and just send it to Headquarters without the decoding system, knowing that Our Side could decode the message faster than Their Side.

So instead of informing me, they'd merely gone off knowing that sooner or later I'd turn up on my own.

Maybe I was talking myself out of those months of anguish, and maybe I wanted to forget them. But the fact remained that I was here at last.

"All right," I said. "So what do we do now?"

"We go on and on and on, Steve, until we're successful."

"Successful?"

He nodded soberly. "Until we can make every man, woman, and child on the face of this Earth as

much a physical superman as we are, our job is not finished."

I nodded. "I learned a few of the answers at the Macklin Place."

"Then this does not come as a complete shock."

"No. Not a complete shock. But there are a lot of loose ends still. So the basic theme I'll buy. Scholar Phelps and his Medical Center is busy using their public position to create that nucleus of a totalitarian state, or a physical hierarchy, or maybe it's monarchy. You and the Highways In Hiding are busy tearing Phelps down because you don't want to see any more rule by the Divine right of Kings, Dictators, or Family Lines."

"Go on, Steve."

"Well, why in the devil don't you announce yourselves?"

"No good, old man. Look, you yourself want to be a Mekstrom. Even with your grasp of the situation, you resent the fact that you cannot."

"You're right."

Phillip nodded slowly. "Let's hypothesize for a moment, taking a subject that has nothing to do with Mekstrom's Disease. Let's take one of the old standby science-fiction plots. Some cataclysm is threatening the solar system. The future of the Earth is threatened, and we have only one spacecraft capable of carrying a hundred people to safety — somewhere else.

How would you select them?"

I shrugged. "Since we're hypotheating, I suppose that I'd select the more healthy, the more intelligent, the more virile, the more—" I struggled for another category and then let it stand right there because I couldn't think of another at that instant.

Phillip agreed. "Health and intelligence and all the rest being pretty much a matter of birth and upbringing, how can you explain to Wilbur Zilch that Oscar Hossenpfeiffer has shown himself smarter and therefore better stock for survival? Maybe you can but the end-result is that Wilbur Zilch slaughters Oscar Hossenpfeiffer. This either provides an opening for Zilch, or if he is caught at it, it provides Zilch with the satisfaction of knowing that he's stopped the other guy from getting what he could not come by honestly."

"So what has this to do with Mekstrom's Disease and supermen?"

"The day that we— and I mean either of us— announces that we can 'cure' Mekstrom's Disease and make physical supermen of the former victims, there will be a large scream from everybody to give them the same treatment. No, we'll tell them, we can't cure anybody who hasn't caught it. Then some pedagogue will stand up and declare that we are suppressing in-

formation. This will be believed by enough people to do us more harm than good. Darn it, we're not absolutely indestructible, Steve. We can be killed. We could be wiped out by a mob of angry citizens who saw in us a threat to their security. Neither we of the Highways nor Phelps of The Medical Center have enough manpower to be safe."

"So that I'll accept. The next awkward question comes up: What are we going to do with me?"

"You've agreed that we cannot move until we know how to inoculate healthy flesh. We need normal humans, to be our guinea pigs. Will you help bring to the Earth's People the blessing that is now denied them?"

THE prospect was received by me with a lot of mingled feelings. While I wanted a Mekstrom Body, the idea of being poked-at, needled, loaded full of cultures, sliced up for microscope specimens, and put through a medical routine did not make me jump up and down with glee. If they'd been able to promise me a successful end, I'd have taken my cultures with sugar and cream (or maybe it's agar) and gone through it gladly. I am an avid supporter of the anti-antivivisectionist school. I want my scholar of surgery to try his knife on a lot of lower animals before he cuts into my precious hide. I want my cures

and antibiotics tried and proven completely on something or someone else before they get around to me.

But on the other hand there was a chance of success, and the mental picture of my return, so that I could repay Catherine for a couple of busted ribs was a very pleasant thought.

"If you are successful, Steve," said Marian, "You'll go down in History along with Otto Mekstrom. You could be the turning point of the human race, you know."

"And if I fail?"

Phillip Harrison's face took on a hard and determined look. "Steve, there is no failure as an end. We shall go on and on until we have success."

That was a fine prospect. Old guinea-pig Cornell, celebrating his seventieth birthday as the medical experimentation went on and on.

Catherine was leaning forward, her eyes bright. "Steve," she cried, "You've just got to!"

"Just call me the unwilling hero," I said in a drab voice. "And put it down that the condemned specimen drank a hearty dinner. I trust that there is a drink in the house."

There was enough whiskey in the place to provide the new specimen with a near-total anaesthesia. The

evening was spent in forced badinage, shallow laughter, and a pointed avoidance of the main subject. The whiskey was good; I took it undiluted and succeeded in getting boiled to the eyebrows before they carted me off to bed.

I did not sleep well despite my anaesthesia. There was too much on my mind and very little of it was the fault of the Harrisons. One of the things that I had to face was the cold fact that part of Catherine's lack of communication with me was caused by logic and good sense. Both History and Fiction are filled with cases where love was set aside because consummation was impossible for any number of good reasons.

So I slept fitfully, and my dreams were as unhappy as the thoughts I had during my waking moments. Somehow I realized that I'd have been far better off if I'd been able to forget Catherine after the accident, if I'd been able to resist the urge to follow the Highways In Hiding, if I'd never known that those ornamental road signs were something more than the desire of some road commission to beautify the countryside. But no, I had to go and poke my big bump of curiosity into the problem. So here I was denied the pleasure of living in the strong body of a Mekstrom.

It was not fair. Although Life itself is seldom fair, it seemed to me

that Life was less fair to me than to others.

And then to compound my feelings of persecution, I woke up once about three in the morning with a strong urge to take a perceptive dig down below. I should have resisted it, but of course, no one has ever been able to resist the urge of his sense of perception.

Down in the living room, Catherine was crying on Phillip Harrison's shoulder. He held her gently with one arm around her slender waist and he was stroking her hair softly with his other hand. I couldn't begin to dig what was being said, but the tableau was unmistakable.

She leaned back and looked at him as he said something. Her head moved in a 'No' motion as she took a deep breath for another bawl. She buried her face in his neck and sobbed. Phillip held her close for a moment and then loosed one hand to find a handkerchief for her. He wiped her eyes gently and talked to her until she shook her head in a visible effort to shake away both the tears and the unhappy thoughts.

Eventually he lit two cigarettes and handed one to her. Side by side they walked to the divan and sat down close together. Catherine leaned against him gently and he put his arm over her shoulders and hugged her to him. She relaxed, looking unhappy, but obviously

taking comfort in the strength and virile physical presence of him.

It was a hell of a thing to dig, in my mental condition. I drifted off to a sleep filled with unhappy dreams while they were still downstairs. Frankly, I forced myself to take that fitful sleep because I did not want to stay awake to follow them.

As bad as the nightmare quality of my dreams were, they were better for me than the probable reality.

OH, I'd been infernally brilliant when I uncovered the first secret of the Highways In Hiding. I found out that I did not know one-tenth of the truth. They had a network of Highways that would make the Department of Roads and Highways look like a backwood, second-rate political organization.

I'd believed, for instance, that the Highways were spotted only along main arteries to and from their Way Stations. The truth was that they had a complete system from one end of the country to the other. Lanes led from Maine and from Florida into a central main Highway that laid across the breadth of the United States. Then from Washington and from Southern California another branching network met this main Highway. Lesser lines served Canada and Mexico. The big, Main Trunk,

though ran from New York to San Francisco with only one large major division: A heavy trunk line that led down to a place in Texas called *Homestead*. Homestead, Texas, was a big center that made Scholar Phelps' Medical Center look like a Teeny Weeny Village by comparison.

We drove in Marian's car. My rented car, of course, was returned to the agency and my own bus was still parked in the garage in New York. They'd have it ferried out as soon as it could be arranged so that I'd not be without personal transportation in Texas. So Catherine remained in Wisconsin because she was too new at being a Mekstrom to be trusted. It took a lot of practice to know how much pressure to apply to the soft body of a normal human, and in many cases to conduct yourself so that the fact of your super-powerful body did not cause a lot of slack jaws and high suspicion.

We drove along the Highways to Homestead, carrying a bag of the Mekstrom Mail.

The trip was uneventful.

CHAPTER XIII

WE started with enthusiasm; with a live and willing subject to work on, they began experimenting. We had some hope even though no one yet had ever been

artificially infected with Mekstrom's Disease. They cut and they dug and they poked needles into me and trimmed out bits of my hide for slides. I helped them by digging my own flesh and letting their better telepaths read my results for their records.

On top of it all, they were damned nice to me. I got the best of everything, and they even had my car shipped out from New York so that I'd have transportation around the settlement. Homestead was a big sprawling settlement, almost forty square miles in size. I took some meager enjoyment out of cocktailing and visiting with Marian Harrison, who as a telepath was more of a watcher than a companion. There was no woo-pitching unless Marian did it with some Mekstrom after hours.

But being nice to me was not enough; it sort of made me feel like Gulliver in Brobdingnag. Not that they were so big. They were just so damned overstrong that they did not know their own strength. This was especially true of the youngsters who could not have had any normal-human experience to slow down their reactions. I tried to rediaper a baby one night and got my ring finger gummed to hell for my efforts. It was like wrestling Bad Cyril in a one-fall match, winner take all.

As the days added up into weeks,

their hope and enthusiasm began to fade. The long list of proposed experiments dwindled and it became obvious that they were starting to work on brand new ideas. But brand new ideas are neither fast in arriving nor high in quantity, and time began to hang dismally heavy.

They began to avoid my eyes. They stopped discussing their attempts on me; I no longer found out what they were doing and how they hoped to accomplish the act. They showed the helplessness that comes of failure, and this feeling of utter futility was transmitted to me.

At first I was mentally frantic at the idea of failure; it is no pleasure to face yourself and admit that you haven't got what it takes, it is not at all easy to face the reorientation department and realize that you are to be pounded, reshaped, and remolded into a mental form that is easier for you to live with. But as the futile days wore on and the fact was practically shoved down my throat, I was forced to admit that there was no future for Steve Cornell.

I began at that time to look forward to my visit to reorientation.

Reorientation is a form of non-fatal suicide. Once reoriented, the problems that make life intolerable are forgotten, your personality is changed, your grasp of everything is revised, your appreciation

of all things comes from an entirely new angle. You are a new person.

Then one morning I faced my image in the mirror and came to the conclusion that if I couldn't be Me, I didn't want to be Somebody Else. It is no good to be

alive if I am not Me, I told my image, who obediently agreed with me.

I didn't even wait to argue with Me. I just went out and got into my car and sloped. It was not hard; everybody in Homestead trusted me.

(To Be Continued)



"And—ha! ha!—get a load of this! . . . 'Of one thing science is certain — this little planet cannot possibly support life!'"

FEATURED NEXT MONTH:—

WANTED: ONE SANE MAN

by FRANK M. ROBINSON

A STARTLING NOVELETTE—THAT MAY HAPPEN TOMORROW!

Homer was a shy Faderfield bachelor; his visitor was a beautiful Pleiades girl. At any rate she was a girl, and Homer had a problem—

A MATTER OF ETHICS

by

Russ Winterbotham

THE fly rod, the letter and the small jar of paint were, in a sense, half of the problem Homer Hopkins had to solve. The other half rested in his complex mind.

Fader's Fadeless Formulae had offered him a position, not a job, to take charge of its research department, at ten thousand a year, twice what he was paid at Faderfield Junior College to teach chemistry. All this was in the letter.

"But I like being a teacher," said Homer. And he looked at the fly rod. "And I also like to fish." Teaching chemistry had left him little time for fishing. The science had advanced with such gigantic strides that Homer was continually catching up on the subject. He spent his vacations going to colleges, and his off days reading literature, orienting himself.

The little jar of paint had brought it about. Homer had sent a jar like it to C. J. Fader suggesting that it be placed on the market. All Homer had wanted was a fat check and a royalty which he could invest so he could retire someday. Instead, C. J. Fader had offered him a job. The Old Man, who ran the principal industry of Faderfield, would expect a new formula a month and Homer was afraid he might not be able to turn one out every month. Homer knew enough about C. J. to realize that if he offered ten thousand, he would expect a ninety-thousand profit. Homer could qualify for the first figure, but he wasn't so sure about the second.

And then the door bell rang.

Homer glanced out the window at the row of lighted houses across the street. He lived by him-



self in a little four-room cottage near the junior college. Twice a week the cleaning woman got rid of the male litter and on Saturdays a student did the outside work to keep the little rented home in trim with the rest of the neat little neighborhood. Homer managed by himself the rest of the time.

Whoever was at the door was not in line with the window. Callers were not infrequent. There were three other bachelor males in the chemistry department who dropped in occasionally. And some of the neighbors came over from time to time, usually to borrow a book. Students sometimes came to see him, especially when their grades were low.

Homer opened the door. It was not a bachelor friend. It was not a neighbor. It was not a student. It was a very pretty young woman. She was dressed like she was going to a masquerade, with spangled tights, or something of that nature, a glittering tiara and shoes covered with rhinestones.

Her hair was black and her eyes were brown. There as a faint flush on her cheeks that looked well with the ivory shade of her smooth skin.

Without being invited, she

stepped past Homer and into the house. She looked around, from floor to the ceiling. She strode across the room and sank down on Homer's overstuffed divan.

"I like this place," she said. "Do you want to move, or will you share it with me?"

"Uh?" Homer laughed nervously. "I beg pardon?"

"What for? You didn't do anything."

"I meant I misunderstood you," Homer said. "I thought you suggested taking my house away from me."

"I didn't," said the young woman. "If you want to stay, it's all right with me. I'll only be here a few days. The place is much too large for one person."

Homer's jaw dropped. He closed his mouth and bobbed his adam's apple a couple of times. But he was beyond words.

SHE rose, strode across the room and opened the front door. She stepped out on the porch and Homer felt a momentary relief. It was an illusion. C. J.'s offer had been more of a shock than he thought. Then she appeared again, carrying a black bag.

"Where will I put my things?" she asked.

"Ma'am," said Homer. "I am a gentleman." That, he decided, was the best way to state his po-

sition in mixed company.

"What has that got to do with it? I'm a lady."

"Certainly, ma'am, but you must realize that what you're suggesting is—er—most unorthodox. I don't propose to turn my house over to you with or without company. Even if—" Homer clamped his jaw shut for he almost said that the offer was attractive. How could he have said such a thing? He'd hardly known this woman for a full minute.

"Your house? I'll admit your arms and legs are yours, and so no doubt is your hair, your teeth, your eyes and your ears. But how can you say this house is yours?"

Homer looked at the girl. She spoke perfect English although now that he noticed there *was* just a slight accent. She had something of an Italian grace, French fire, and the wholesome heartiness of Scandinavia in her, and yet she was different.

"It is my private property," said Homer. "I'll admit I do not own it, but I rent it. I have a year's lease."

"When I studied your customs and manners I must have overlooked a few things," she said. "But I can't see how you can own a dwelling."

Homer was horrified. Undoubtedly she was from behind the Iron Curtain. "This is America,

ma'am," he said stiffly. "I thought this was the earth," she said.

Again Homer's jaw dropped as if he had not heard correctly. "Do you mean that you are from Some Other Place?" His voice supplied capitals.

"I am assuredly not of *this* planet," she said. "I'm Qalith of Planet 12, star 10, Pleiades." Her smile was pleasant too, Homer observed. "I learned your language by telepathy but unfortunately I didn't go deeply into your economics and social customs."

Homer decided she must have tuned in on Russia, then he realized that English is not usually spoken there, so he assumed she had listened to some subversives somewhere. If she *was* from the Pleiades. More than likely she was a spy. "Do you think the Revolution will come during our lifetime?" he asked.

"There is a revolution every twenty-four hours on this planet," she smiled. "On my planet the revolution is 26 hours, your hours."

This was a joke, Homer decided. A student trick, extremely in bad taste. Especially since it entailed a girl to expose herself in such a costume.

"I hope you didn't park your spaceship by a fire plug," he said sarcastically.

"Fire plug? I missed that when I learned your language. Something electrical, no doubt. But if you mean my spaceship, it is in a desolate area south of here." She pointed in the direction of the Cambridge Manor Country Club. "We know that spaceships have a disturbing effect on primitive races such as yours."

In spite of Homer's determination not to believe this girl, he felt an admiration in the way she played her role. He wondered if there was really a spaceship on the golf course. It would certainly have a disturbing effect on early morning golfers. Good heavens! C. J. Fader belonged to Cambridge Manor!

"Miss—er—Qalith," Homer said, "your being here presents problems, whether or not you are from the Pleiades! You must understand that this isn't the proper thing to do." Homer glanced toward the window and quickly moved over to the venetian blinds which he turned downward, just in case one of the neighbors looked in. "I must sit down and think a moment. Then we'll decide what must be done."

"I know what I'm going to do," said Qalith. "So you decide what you're going to do."

HOMER had a bottle of bourbon in his kitchen cabinet.

The board of trustees of Faderfield Junior College frowned on faculty drinking of any sort, and of course alcoholic beverages were forbidden on the campus under strictest penalties—expulsion for a student, dismissal for an instructor. But Homer was extremely moderate and there were times when he felt that whisky had a respectable place in the scheme of things. He poured himself a drink, after offering one to Miss Qalith. She declined.

"I must be careful what I eat and drink on strange planets," she said.

"A wise forethought," Homer said, with a nod. He mixed the whisky with tap water, dropped in an ice cube and began sipping it as he sat in a straight-backed chair opposite her.

"Now," he began, "I won't question anything you've said. It doesn't matter really whether you were born in Faderfield, the next county or a planet 200 light years distant. There's one fact we can't deny. You are a woman. Right?"

"You are perceptive, sir—"

"My name's Homer," he said. He smiled and she smiled back. Homer finished his drink and put aside the glass. "I'm a man."

"That I had already perceived."

"Do men and women—ah—occupy the same lodgings on Planet

12?"

"Certainly. And so do they here. I looked in all the houses on this street before I came to yours. I picked your house because you were alone."

"But those people are married!" said Homer. "I'm an unmarried man. A bachelor."

"Are you a social outcast? An exile?" Qalith asked.

"No. I have not chosen a mate—as yet," he didn't want her to think he was opposed to the idea. "On earth it's not customary for an unmarried couple—"

"Oh," said Qalith. "That old thing."

Homer felt a little indignant. "It isn't to be ignored."

"Far be it from me to upset the earth," she said. "I just dropped in for a brief time to complete our museum catalog of your system. We're not complete on the earth, you see, and your little village seemed to have a pretty fair representation of human society, except a lack of primitive tribes. Now I'm not so sure it is anything but primitive."

"We are civilized," said Homer. "Highly civilized. We have a certain moral code and your being with me jeopardizes my position in respect to that code." He paused. "If anyone saw you here, I'd be disgraced. I couldn't face my fellow citizens." He added

mentally that he wouldn't get that job with Fader's Fadeless Formulae if he wanted it.

"Is that why you closed the blinds?"

Homer nodded.

"It would seem to me to be worse if people knew I was here and didn't see us," she said. "But I'm new to your planet and I still have a problem. Where will I stay?"

Homer thought quickly. "There's a rooming house where some of the lady teachers stay." He paused, looked at her spangled costume and shook his head. "But your clothes wouldn't be understood. They'd think you were a burlesque queen."

"A burlesque queen?"

"Another thing you'd never understand," said Homer. "If I could find the proper clothes, I could say you were a cousin from Des Moines—"

"What is a cousin from Des Moines?"

Homer shook his head. "You'd give away the show."

"Why don't you say I'm from another planet?"

"No one would believe it. In fact, I'm not sure I believe it myself."

"If Earthlings won't believe the truth, why not let me stay here? No one would believe I did."

"You don't understand," Homer

groaned. "There's such a thing as custom. Moral law. Ethics. Social behavior. There are ways a person can act because to act otherwise is not the thing to do. Certain things cannot be done and people are quick to suspect that they are being done sometimes when they're not being done. Am I clear?"

"No," said Qalith. "But the earth file in our museum is going to be a large one."

Suddenly the phone rang. Homer jumped and knocked his empty glass to the floor. Quickly he rose and lifted the phone.

"This is Fader, Hopkins," came a voice over the wire. "About my letter—"

"Oh yes, C. J. It came today."

"This is a big thing, my boy."

"I know it is, C. J."

"I want to get started on it immediately."

"To be frank, C. J. I wanted a little time to think it over."

"I'll make it twelve thousand if you make up your mind now—tonight," Fader said. "I'm going to expand. I'll make Fader's Fadeless the biggest line of paints in the world, but I've got to have research. You've convinced me you can do the job—"

"Can't I call you back C. J.? I just want to study this thing—" And get rid of Qalith, Homer told himself.

"No! I'm coming over to talk to you." There was a click in the receiver and Homer held a silent phone.

"A funny instrument," said Qalith, "It'll never take the place of telepathy."

HOMER put the phone back in its cradle, and picked up the empty liquor glass. He took it to the kitchen. It wasn't the first thing he had to do, but C. J. might not approve so Homer had to get it out of sight. He closed the kitchen cabinet door so the whisky was out of sight. Then he went to the living room and saw that Qalith was unpacking her bag.

Homer could see the spangles of garments like the one she wore. She was setting out small boxes, which looked a great deal like boxes of things that women always carry—perfume, cosmetics, and so on.

"No, no, no!" Homer shouted. "You mustn't unpack your bag! C. J. will be here any minute."

"I was here first," said Qalith.

"Listen, Qalith," said Homer, "On your planet there must be certain rules of conduct that may seem outlandish when considered alone, but have very good reason for being when you consider them in the light of other facts."

"Oh yes," said Qalith. "One

should always wear a telepathy helmet when he's keeping a secret."

Homer took Qalith by the arm, led her to the divan and sat down beside her. Quickly and pointedly he told her about Fader's Fadeless Formulae and the opportunity that faced him. And he gave her the Facts of life.

"The only drawback is that old skinflint Fader himself," Homer explained. "As I'm fixed now, I have a pleasant job. The dean's nice and easy going. I get along fine and I like my work. Fader will pay me twice as much, but he'll be breathing down my neck every minute, making sure he's making a 90 per cent profit on everything I do."

"You don't know whether to take a job in which you'll be unhappy, but which can give you what you want or to stay on a job where you'll be happy, but poor. Is that it?" Qalith looked at him with a curious expression in her eyes.

"That's it," said Homer.

The front doorbell rang and Homer realized he'd spent more time explaining to Qalith than he should have spent. He jumped to his feet. His arms swept up the boxes and piled them into the bag. He lifted the bag and ran to the kitchen. "Hide, Qalith! Hide quickly! In the bedroom and close

the door!" he said.

He thrust the bag in the broom closet off the kitchen.

When he returned he saw Qalith admitting C. J. Fader at the front door.

"Harrumph!" said Mr. Fader. His eyes traveled over Qalith from spangled boots to gleaming tiara.

"Oh, Mr. Fader," said Homer thickly.

"I must have arrived more quickly than you anticipated," said Fader. He stepped forward and nudged Homer. "You sly young dog."

"It's not what you think, C. J.," said Homer.

"I haven't said a word about what I thought," said Fader. "What I want to know is where you found her."

"I didn't—"

"I'm from another planet," said Qalith.

"I'll say you are, baby," said Fader, chucking her under the chin. "You know, Homer here had me fooled. But I can see he's not as namby pamby as I thought. Yes, sir! He's quite a boy."

"He's been explaining all of the manners and customs of the earth to me," said Qalith.

"And I'll bet he knows how!" said Fader.

"It's really the truth," said Homer. "Qalith is from the Pleiades."

"Oh yes! Near Cincinnati! Well I always heard those Cincy girls were pretty cute. Playing at the Roxy?"

Homer shuddered. "She's left her spaceship on the Cambridge Manor golf links," he said.

Mr. Fader roared. "Homer, you're a man after my own heart! I'll tell you what, boy. You come into my organization and I'll make you a vice president with a big chunk of stock. You can have charge of research and if you can line up the babes for our conventions we'll put the whole damned paint trade in our pocket inside of two years! After all, boy, it's girls and salesmen, not the quality of your product that win on today's market!"

Slowly the idea sank into Homer's brain. Mr. Fader hadn't wanted to hire him because he was anything special as a chemist.

"How much will I get?" Homer asked bluntly.

"The stock ought to be worth twelve thousand a year," said Fader. "On top of that you'll get twenty-five thousand as vice president in charge of research and conventions."

And the ten thousand that Homer hoped to get had been cheap. Ten thousand for a chemist, twenty-five for a salesman, plus a bundle of stock. A high priced pimp.

"Are you sure I'll be worth it?"

"Don't talk like a nincompoop, boy! We're in." He turned to Qalith. "Got any friends, honey?"

QALITH'S eyes seemed to gleam. Fader's hand straightened with a jerk. He stood stiffly.

"He's hypnotized," said Qalith. "We can talk and he won't hear or remember what we say."

"There's not much to be said," said Homer.

"You don't want the job?"

"With this lecherous old tomat?"

Qalith smiled. "You are Puritanical," she said. "You're stuffy and naive and innocent. But I like you."

"I'm probably crazy too," said Homer.

Qalith shook her head. "No. You're unhappy. You don't like being a teacher either, do you?"

"Of course I do!" Homer spoke with too much emphasis. "It's a pleasant life."

"But you've seen broken old men teaching. Men who had brains and who didn't have a cent in their savings account. You know you'll starve all your life and get very little thanks for discovering genius. You know and you want to get away from it. That's why you even considered going with Fader in the first place. If you'd really been contented

you'd have turned him down right off."

Homer realized she spoke the truth. "But any job has its drawbacks. I've either got to teach chemistry or become a research chemist. From what I've seen, Fader and Faderfield Junior College are my only choices. And Chemistry is all I know."

"You know about ethics and customs of your planet. You know what people are supposed to do and rarely do."

"It doesn't make a living for me."

"Not on earth. But on Planet 12, you'd be an authority on the planet Earth. The only authority because you know all about the earth's unkept laws of social conduct and you're one of the few that ever kept those laws."

One thing held Homer back. "Is your planet really communistic? Don't you have private property?"

"Do you own this house?"

"Well I rent it, but some people do own their houses."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, they have mortgages and taxes and so on."

"Actually very few people own what they think they have, excepting their bodies."

"But men move in with women and women move in with men—"

"This thing you call marriage

corresponds with a custom we have," said Qalith. "I was going to marry you."

"I don't know you and 'you don't know me!'"

"How do you think I found you without telepathy? And you've seen me now—is there anything wrong about me that—well, that—"

"Nothing!" Homer said fervently. He thought of people who had courted many years and still didn't know each other. Then he glanced down at Fader, still star-

ing hypnotically. "What a tale he's going to spread about town tomorrow!" Homer said.

"He won't believe it," said Qalith.

"I'll be gone," said Homer.

"Then we'd better get going. You can work on the earth file on the trip to the Pleiades."

"Says you," said Homer. He got her bag from the broom closet and as an afterthought, he picked up his rod and tackle. Maybe he'd get some fishing done on Planet 12, among other things—

THE END

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *James V. McConnell* ★

(Concluded from page 2)

cluding the two-legged variety, dictators of all breeds, censorship, exercise, rolling my own cigarettes, parts of psychology, suspenders, stupidity, most Hollywood movies, dining by candlelight, leaky fountain pens, holes in my pockets, most oil paintings, and above all having to work for a living.

I think: Norway has wonderful scenery and fine people but pretty dreary food, psychology will some day be a science, Thomas Mann is our greatest contemporary author, man will not destroy himself with atomic energy, the German language is one of the most horrible

sins perpetrated, Rhine is wrong and there is nothing even close to telepathy, modern music should be listened to more often, and that I should be paid more for the stories I write!

I hope: War will not come for a good time yet if ever, America is losing its egg-head phobia, cancer will soon be whipped, the University of Texas will win a few football games next year, and that you enjoy reading HUNTING LICENSE which you will find elsewhere in this issue!

James V. McConnell

Earthmen had never ventured into the vast unknown beyond the galaxy. But now a survey was ordered and a ship sent out. So Braun went on —

The Voyage Of Vanishing Men

by

Stanley Mullen

THEY still talk of Braun, and the Fourth Intergalactic Survey.

Other men before him had gone out into the far, dark places. Three previous expeditions had gone out and vanished completely. Then the *Venture IV* went out and out and out countless miles and light-years and whatever else it is —and out there in the lonely darkness something happened. Nobody knew exactly what happened, but there was a lot of guessing. Only one man came back. Braun. And there was talk . . .

Tending bar anywhere is better, they say, than an academic degree in psychology. Tending bar on one of the way stations to the stars you see people — most of them human — as they really are, and in all stages of emotion. You see them coming and going, and a few already gone. By little signs, you can

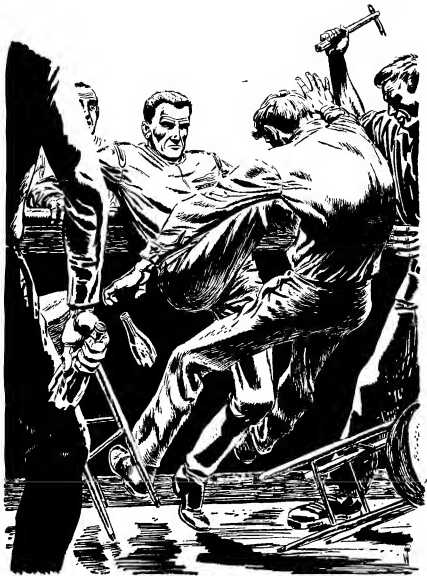
tell a lot about them, and make a guess at what is wrong with the wrong ones.

There was Braun.

Angular as a stick-bug, he stood at the bar, elbows digging into the polished mahogany, one foot cocked on the rail. He was drinking alone as if it had become a habit, and the customers edged away from him as if not wanting to make it too obvious. As usual, his go-to-hell face looked past you into the backbar mirror and out again to cover the whole place. He was older and changed, though, as he would be. Deep lines furrowed the tight, tanned, leathery features, and his eyes still held some of that awful emptiness of space between the star-packs.

Nobody said anything, at first.

Braun watched them, a humorous half-defiant glint in his eye. But there was pain in him, in his voice



as he spoke.

"What's the matter? Am I poison, or something?"

Somebody said it, then. In a stage whisper. "I had friends on the *Venture IV*."

"So did I," Braun answered quickly. "A lot of friends. So before somebody works up nerve to ask, I don't know."

"Don't know?" a man named Cutter pursued the point coldly. "You were there! . . ."

"I was there," admitted Braun. "I still say it. I don't know what happened to anybody. I've told the authorities that over and over. I've told anybody who'd listen. You don't have to believe me. I don't give a —"

"Nobody's told us anything," Cutter insisted. "We haven't heard a whisper about it. And, speaking for all of us, we'd like to be sure about you . . . before we go on drinking at the same bar . . ."

It was going to be like that as long as Braun lived. People will talk, and if there's a choice, they'll guess the ugly thing, every time. Wherever he went, there would be people to ask that question, and somebody to smirk if he answered it.

You could see trouble coming. Whatever Braun answered . . .

Braun was never a man to talk much about himself. It was always

the places he had been and seen, or wanted to go. Like all old-time spacemen, he was a bird of passage. Between trips, he came in a few times, got to be a fixture. But he was always coming or going somewhere never lighting or staying put.

You don't learn too much about a man in a bar, casually. Little things add up and hint at the bigger ones. You can call him by his first name casually, and hash over mutual acquaintances, that's all.

Maybe you talk about the things men talk about. Life and death. Men and spaceships. Life on distant worlds. Braun had knocked around the galaxy like a lot of people since the DuMont space-time drive came into general use. He had seen more than the ordinary man even dreams about, but there was always a restless and curious wondering about more distant stars and their planets. On one classic occasion, you even helped him wonder about other galaxies, and if the new drive would ever take men out into the far, dark spaces where ships never ventured.

When Braun's big break came, you heard about it from someone else, since Braun was far away, at a planet-base circling a star that was just a number in a catalog. There were no formal goodbyes out there, just technical admonitions. Then a speck diminished into no-

where, with no instruments to track an object accelerating into speeds so many times greater than light that mathematics became weird paradoxes, and nothing existing in normal dimensions even makes sense.

EVENTUALLY the ship came back, and Braun with it. Nobody knew much more than that. No official announcements were made, no actual denials or accusations. Rumor hinted at ugliness, and an investigation going on. People made the usual wild and extravagant guesses, and there were the formless whispers that start nowhere and end nowhere.

Braun put his back to the bar and looked over the crowd soberly, one by one. This must have happened to him many times before, as it probably would again. Braun had his own way of dealing with such situations, and maybe he was right.

"I don't know what happened," he said slowly. "I'll say it again, just once. I don't know. If you don't like it, I'm here, waiting. One at a time, or the whole ratpack of you. How do you want it?"

In any real, deadly brawl, voices are rarely raised. There is no loud and explosive discussion. Instead, all movement jells, crystallizes in

utter silence. Something breaks it. Something like a flung beer mug. Then comes a five-ring circus of action.

Braun ducked. The beer mug struck in foaming, splintering destruction. The backbar mirror dissolved in a chiming avalanche of glass.

Cutter led the rush. Braun's back was braced to the bar. He seemed oddly relaxed, almost happy. Somebody heaved another beer mug. It missed, but most of the beer splashed into Braun's face and trickled slowly down him.

"I like beer," he said, "but not that well."

Like a spring letting go, Braun snapped out to meet them. His long arms caught Cutter and hoisted him high, then hurled him bodily over the stick and into the stacked glassware.

By then, if not before, you eased toward the light switch and cut it. Darkness slammed down like a solid barrier. But other solids moved through it, colliding. grunting, swearing, shouting, sometimes groaning. Gradually, the tumult died out of itself.

When the lights came on again, Braun still stood at the bar, though several places further down. The darkness had been kind to him. With everyone against him, he could work freely. And at saloon

brawling, he was a master craftsman. Casualties held to a minium, but there were plenty of cotton and catgut, splint and plaster cases. Cutter was still out, cold, and went to the hospital with the others. Not everyone joins in a rough-house, and enough clear-headed witnesses remained to spare Braun any risk of charges. His fists were red and raw, but he seemed unhurt, bodily.

Somebody offered him a drink. But Braun just stood and looked at it, then raised his head to glance up where the backbar mirror had been.

"Someday, they'll use stainless steel for that," he said. "Then half the fun will be gone."

Slowly his face screwed up tight, the leathery skin wrinkling like a withered apple. Eyes closed, he hammered a raw fist on the bar till blood spurted. He was like a hurt child trying to hurt himself more to get even with fate.

"I had friends on the *Venture IV*," he cried wildly. "A lot of good friends. What happened to them? Where are they? . . ."

Calming down, he started talking. His voice was oddly detached, and so low you could hardly hear him.

"I was the ninth man," he said. "The rest were all techs, of one kind or another. I was the only spacetramp aboard. I've often won-

dered why they picked me, but somebody must have had a good reason. Maybe I was the catalyst. Each of the others could do one job extremely well. I could take over and do anything in an emergency — not as well, but a scratch job to keep the show on the road. And when the 'ologies' developed friction, I was the lubricant — the guy with no axe to grind who kept the other's axes sharpened and tempered."

BRAUN stopped and flung himself at the drink. He seemed to need it. But he was under control again, almost too much under control.

"We were way out — somewhere," he continued. "About as far as the others ever got. You can't express it in miles or in time, because neither of them have the right meaning. Not out there."

He stopped again. His eyes seemed to be staring beyond the outer limits of darkness, beyond the mystical barrier of the speed of light itself . . .

"The ship came out of warp automatically. Robot machinery was set for that, to bring us out at intervals — though nobody could be sure just how it would function. Ordinary time-intervals do not exist, and time itself is a random factor — out there. They tell me we

were gone more than five years, here. For us, it was weeks. Most of the time we were in suspended animation, of course, with automatic controls to handle the ship and rouse one or more of us at intervals. Usually the ship was out of the warp and stopped when we were awakened. Twice, both in the early stages, it was not like that.

"Those times we were awake and in motion together. It was weird. Space was like black, transparent cellophane, wrinkled and bunched together with the ship leaping from one wrinkle to another. We could not see it, but that was the way we imagined it. We could see, though.

"Stars thinned out and drew together. Stars, like luminous lice crawling on the black body of eternity . . ."

* * *

. Velocity and acceleration needles met in the center of the gauge. No change in the relation of the ship to anything was apparent, and none would be. Out of the warp, the ship hung, unmoving, in a vastness of dark. Even the galaxies showed but faintly in the visiplates. Destination was the spiral M31 in Andromeda, but the rest of Andromeda lay far behind, and a faint smudge ahead seemed as far away as the home galaxy, which was exactly the case.

Venture IV had reached the half-

way point, with three quarters of a million light years of loneliness in either direction. Poets and writers have called it the point of no return, when a ship has reached a point in its voyage where the distance back is as far as that still ahead.

"Well, this is it," said Charters wearily. "We'll have to decide now whether to go back . . . or, if we think we can make it, push on ahead."

Charters was captain pro tem, though, on a technical ship, space formalities and titles were phantoms.

Braun was unimpressed. "All right, it's the raw end of nowhere. And we're here. What does it prove?"

Charters gave him a friendly slap.

"It proves one thing. That we can make it — next time. We could have made it this time if we'd known what to expect. We'll go back with our report, and the next ship will get there. And make it back to tell about it. We could get there, this time — but not back. Sure, we're all disappointed. But don't take it so hard. We haven't really failed. We've made it easier to get the job done. Next time."

"Yes," agreed Braun bitterly. "The job will be done. But not by us. We'll be too old before another

ship is ready. And by the time the analysts are through with this one, it will be junk. Just like us."

Charters laughed.

The two were alone in the control room. The other techs, for once all awake at the same time, were busily checking their instruments, each in his own department.

Braun was suffering from reaction. In an emergency, he could function superbly. But with nothing to do, he brooded.

It was definitely the raw end of nowhere, though the instruments and record tapes called it by a variety of mathematical equations. According to the figures, the *Venture IV* had made an interesting voyage, turning itself completely inside out several times at irregular intervals, smashing all existing speed and distance records and extending the tenuous boundaries of man's interstellar and intergalactic survey by a quarter million light years. Other ships might have gone further, but if they had, no one knew about it. They had vanished into some limbo of space —

MASS proximity alarms blared through the corridors and cubicles of the *Venture IV*.

Nerves, already tensed, vibrated like thin glass, ready to disintegrate from resonance

There should have been no mass

anywhere near. Not even a grain of cosmic dust.

Blackness stretched in all directions, relieved only by the distant, dimly glowing smudges of galaxies. Assembled in the control room, *Venture IV's* company discussed the mystery. No conclusion was possible. Whatever was affecting the mass detectors lay dead ahead, still out of vision range, and not even showing in the telescopic relays.

By vote, it was decided to investigate. The *Venture IV* operated on democratic principles. Responsibility like risk was shared equally, and "Captain" Charters had one vote.

Atomic jets, still useful for short range runs and for close maneuvering, nudged the ship gently into motion, which is a relative thing in deep space. In this case, relative to —

What? . . .

By instrument only, the *Venture IV* groped blindly toward the unknown object. By instrument only was it possible to gauge the approach. Proximity needles wavered wildly, then settled down to indicate swiftly diminishing distance, as if the alien object were matching velocity with the *Venture IV* on a collision course.

At such speeds, collision was possible. Charters began to worry

silently. Dubiously he eyed his crew, picked men, all volunteers eager to challenge the unknown. But the unknown was still unknown, and responding almost too eagerly.

"Could it be another spaceship?" asked Braun, voicing the thought in every mind.

Charters just looked at him. "From — *there?*"

"From anywhere?" Braun persisted. "Who knows about curves or orbits out here?"

Topping, the astrophysicist, smiled grimly. "Who knows about anything here? It wasn't till the mid-Twentieth Century that we even knew M₃₁ was as big as our own galaxy and twice as far away as had been thought. Or guessed at the truth behind the Doppler shift."

"But a spaceship . . . out here!" scoffed Charters.

Topping shrugged. "It could be. It could even be one of ours. From the future, perhaps. We've done some weird doubling about in the space-time continuum, remember."

"It could be anything, then," said Braun.

"Anything," echoed Topping.

"Start deceleration," ordered Charters, concerned with the more practical aspects of a possible encounter in alien space. "Swing the controls over to manual. I'll feel better about the ship if it comes to

dodging a collision. You have the practical piloting experience, Braun. Take over."

Grinning, Braun seated himself at the manual keyboard and started pressing studs. Lights blinked off and on in patterns on the screen at vision level. He switched over to the visiplates mounted on the blunt bow. A sector of blackness dead ahead was projected onto the screen.

There was nothing to see. Light in interstellar space is too feeble to reveal anything not self luminous.

"Try a radilume beam," suggested Charters.

THE screen flickered, then resumed its blackness. With no dust, no anything, to reflect light back to the ship, the beam lost itself in the immensity.

Braun worked with the studs.

"We're slowing," he announced. "Now what?"

"Try a dead stop, but be ready to move out fast in case the alien continues a collision course."

Braun nodded. In the artificial gravity field, no effect of deceleration was perceptible. The ship slowed and stopped as dead as a ship stops with no reference point to anything. What actually happened was a delicate balancing upon a number of mathematical equations, themselves unstable.

Mass proximity needles, showing the expected increase by squares, indicated that the stranger also had come to a full stop by matching exactly at zero. It was an interesting fact that so far from home the familiar laws of gravity seemed to hold their familiar relations. More interesting was the fact that the alien object or ship had stopped.

"See anything?" asked Charters.

"Not a thing," admitted Topping.

"How about the telescopes?"

McClure, the astrogator, reported then. Under the circumstances, his voice sounded curiously matter of fact.

"A faint point of light. Not enough disk to tell much of anything about it. We'll try with —"

"Can't be more than a mile away, I'd guess," said Braun. "What do we do now? Just sit here and wait?"

Topping grunted. "Reminds me of a pair of strange dogs meeting away from home and sniffing at each other with mutual curiosity and mistrust."

"That's about the way it would be," Charters agreed weakly. "If that is an alien ship out there, what else could we do?"

"We could try for contact. Communicate with them, somehow."

"Morse code?" asked Braun bitterly.

"There were humans in other

parts of our own galaxy. Some of them intelligent and highly civilized. We set up communications with them."

"There was a common basis with them," argued Braun. "And we found some non-human intelligent races. Communications didn't do so well with them, and the *Venture IV* is no warship. We came here to windowshop, not to buy, and not to take over anything by force. We're not equipped for a row."

Charters broke in. "Topping is right. We'll try to set up communication. With a modulated light beam."

"Go ahead and try," said Braun. "I'll stand by, just in case of trouble. And when your idea fails, we can start talking sense."

Charters and Topping left him at the controls and joined Tal Roberts in the communications office. Braun waited.

When they returned, he could tell by the faces that their plan had fallen through.

"Struck a snag?" he asked amiably.

Charters' smile was weak. "We tried two messages. After a short wait, they repeated them. You might say we've established communications. But we're not getting anywhere."

"The same messages? Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe they have no imagination. I have an idea if you're ready to listen."

Charters nodded. "Go ahead . . . if it's nothing that will endanger the ship."

"The ship isn't involved. We have two space-lifeboats—though I can't figure where we'd escape to if anything went sour out here. I'll take one and slip away from the ship. With luck, I can sneak up on our friends. Without lights. Keep your beam turned on, aimed right at the alien. I'll stay out of the beam, but it should give enough light to see by. If the thing looks like a real spaceship, and there's a chance the occupants are human, I'll try to make actual contact. If not, I'll scurry on back. How about it?"

"It could be dangerous. If anything happens —"

"You won't be any worse off. Probably, if it's another ship, the people are just as scared and curious as we are. As the show stands, you don't even dare try to run for it. I'm expendable."

"That's a matter of opinion. I won't rule on this, Braun. We'll call the gang together and decide by vote."

HALF an hour later, the lifeboat was ready. Serviced with air,

food and water for an indefinite time, the tiny craft lay in its cradle.

"Keep a light in the window for me," said Braun.

He climbed aboard through the miniature airlock, which closed behind him. Solenoid magnets conveyed the lifeboat through chutes into the valve of the main airlock. Doors opened and closed with automatic finality. Air hissed back into the ship as pumps emptied the valve. With pressure equalized, the outer door opened into space.

Braun eased his tiny craft free, then turned and ran forward alongside the *Venture IV*. From outside, the explorer ship seemed tremendous. It was a small world in itself, complete, self-sustaining. But mass-conversion was necessary to power the velocities far beyond the speed of light, and already the voyage had eaten away too much of the ship's mass.

A phantom glow hovered about the forward compartments as if the metallic shell caught and reflected faint light from a distant source. Braun wondered about that subconsciously, but in the midst of so many wonders, one more mystery meant little.

There was no light beam to be seen. His instruments found a course parallel to the invisible beam and followed it for him, with

the robot pilot in charge.

But for the ship dwindling behind him, the vault of space seemed empty. In the blackness ahead, though he could not see it, was a single small luminous speck. Behind him, the light of the ship diminished slowly to infinity. It vanished. Braun was alone with his mission.

With no visible reference point, Braun's senses became unreliable. Unlighted, the lifeboat seemed a mote of darkness lost in the greater immensities. Even on the brink of the last unknown, the man grew restless and depressed. With nothing to see, nothing to occupy the senses of his brain, he was bored.

Braun groped blindly and gave himself the luxury of a cigarette. While it lasted, the red glow of the cigarette's coal gave comfort to his loneliness. It gave him something on which to concentrate.

There was no up, no down, no sideways, only ahead and behind, with invisible dots of light to identify each. He felt oddly trapped, at the mercy of automatic instruments. Curious and unpleasant illusions crowded upon him.

For a time, he thought that all matter had vanished from the universe, that only he and his lifeboat existed in all the great void. Later, he thought that light itself had vanished. Telescopically, in any di-

rection, he could have found light, but to his unaided eyes all darkness was the same. Then came the weirder illusions of other senses, that his course followed no straight line or sane curves, but moved endlessly upon some infinite spiral.

Time passed, and his eyes grew so accustomed to darkness that they did not see the light when it appeared. Ahead, just a faint point, steady, steel-hard, unwinking, it emerged from the blackness. Slowly it increased in radiance rather than in size. Then at last it was a disk, like a beacon set out to guide him in.

There was a beam, invisible with nothing to reflect its tight radiance or diffuse it. But as before, when leaving his own ship, he avoided the beam.

Cruising closer, Braun began to make out details.

It was a ship, no doubt about that. A phantom glow hovered about its forward compartments as if the metallic shell caught and reflected faint light from a distant source. It was a ship, all right. A ship painfully like the *Venture IV*. A philosopher might have meditated upon parallel evolutions, but Braun was too deeply shocked for delvings into the deeper relations between man and his environments.

THE ALIEN ship was identical. Braun satisfied himself of that

by circling, studying every aspect of the stranger. There was the same indefinable quality which stamped it as man-made.

Almost hysterical with his discovery, Braun nerved himself to switch-off the automatic pilot and take over manual controls. Then he eased in quickly beside an air lock which might have been the same one he had left. Magnetic grapnels reached out from the lifeboat, caught and dragged the lesser mass to the greater. At the controls, Braun guided his tiny craft to the airlock valve, and the outer doors slid shut and locked heremetically behind him.

Some kind of atmosphere would be hissing into the valve now, building up pressure. It had to work like that.

Almost beside himself, Braun crawled into a spacesuit, then settled back to wait impatiently.

Light flooded the valve as the inner doors slid smoothly open. Braun made routine tests, then opened his cockleshell lifeboat hatch. Blinded by light, he climbed out. On rubbery legs, encased in the bulging suit of space armor, he walked to the gaping doorway and entered the alien ship.

If a trap, it was a good one.

Braun staggered backward. As his eyes became accustomed to the light, he stared. Disbelief in his

senses and doubt of his sanity showed on his face.

Opening the vent in his space helmet, he took a deep breath. Then he stared curiously at —

Charters and Topping.

"You weren't gone long," observed Charters. The pair studied Braun, their expressions puzzled.

"I guess I didn't get very far," admitted Braun uneasily. "Am I crazy or is it everything else?"

"That's anyone's guess, said Topping. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure I know."

They waited for explanations while Braun took a stiff slug of coffee laced with brandy.

"Somehow I must have got turned around," admitted Braun ruefully. "I can understand that, but the lifeboat was set on automatic pilot. I thought I came straight across, and with the robot pilot I should have. What do you think happened?"

Topping was sober. "There are several possible explanations. I don't like any of them. Maybe there's a flaw in space here. It could act like a mirror, reflecting back our own mass and the beam of our own light. Who knows? There may not even be an alien ship out there."

"But there's nothing material out there," objected Braun. "I was there, and our instruments would

show anything above the size of a speck of dust. For that matter, we can see the thing in our telescopes, and there's nothing we know that can distort the gravity-effect of mass let alone turn it around like light reflected from a mirror. Who ever heard of —"

"Who ever heard of nine men sealed in an oversized can and set down halfway between home galaxy and M31?" reproved Topping. "Light and gravity may not be functions only of our space-time continuum but of others adjacent too and even overlapping ours. We know very little about the nature of either, and some of our unexplained phenomena may be the result of actions and reactions outside our continuum."

"That's getting too deep for me," said Braun. "I'm willing to try again . . . if only to prove I didn't funk out the first time. And this time I'll go across with the lights blazing. I want you to use radar and visual scanners on me all the way."

Charters shook his head. "We're up against something we don't understand. I'm not sure I should permit—"

"What's the harm?" pleaded Braun. "I came through without a scratch before. The worst that can happen is a repeat of the same farce. Besides, I've just had a brain-

storm. Suppose this is not the same ship I left. Suppose there really are two ships exactly alike, even to the people on board. Suppose that there are two civilizations that developed identically—"

"Maybe you'd better go," laughed Charters. "If you keep on in that vein, you'll give us all nightmares."

Braun's second try followed the same routine as the first. The difference was in Braun himself. Before, he had been mildly excited, calm but overstrained, expecting almost anything. There was a grimness about his second venture. He felt moody and more depressed than before. This time, there was no boredom.

Before leaving, he took a good look around, fixing the faces of his companions into his memory, engraving the ship and endless details of its structure and decoration into his brain. He felt as if he were leaving all of it behind him forever.

The worst that can happen, he thought, is the same thing.

He was wrong about that

APPROACHING the alien ship, he braced himself. There was the light. Then the ship, with its metallic shimmer of reflected light dimmed by distance.

Again he circled, studying the

contours of the immense fabrication. He remembered an old French proverb about the more a thing changes the more it remains the same. The ship was the same. It was the *Venture IV*. He would stake his life and his sanity on it.

No matter. In a way he was relieved. Once inside the ship, he would let the experts explain it to him. At least he had tried. Nobody could say this time that he funk'd the job. They would have had the scanners on him all the way. And this time he knew—somehow—that he had not turned around from any confusion. Also, with the lights on, he had watched the automatic pilot. There had been no trick turns. He had it on the flight-recording tapes.

If the lifeboat had returned to its point of departure, the only possible explanation was that a space-warp or a flaw in the space-time continuum had turned it inside out.

"End of the line," Braun murmured contentedly. "End of the line again."

Skilfully he maneuvered the lifeboat up to the bulk of the *Venture IV*. He grappled it to the airlock valve and slipped it inside on the skids.

The outer doors closed. This time he was so sure of where he was that he did not bother with the spacesuit. He waited till the inner doors opened to matched pres-

ures, then scuttled out of the lifeboat. The air was breathable, the usual hydroponic cycle stuff, just what he was used to. It smelled oddly of pumps as it always does, pump-packing and growing things. Air in the lifeboat had been too rich in ozone, and Braun was giddy with the sharp tang of it.

Braun strode confidently into the ship.

No one was around to greet him. It was a gag they had worked up, he figured. All right, he'd play along.

Through the ship he went, calling out names. Echoes rang hollowly in the vast interior, but they were the only answer. He kept wandering and calling, wandering and crying out. Finally, he was screaming hysterically.

It was a long time before the fact got through solidly to him. He was alone on the ship.

So far as he could tell, it was the *Venture IV*. Everything about the ship was the same. It was *his* ship. Wherever he had been, he was back on *his* ship. He had to keep on assuring himself of that. It was either the *Venture IV* . . . or an exact duplicate. But the other duplicate had duplicated the people, too.

"Where is everybody?" he screamed.

He went on screaming for a long time. A very long time . . .

SMOKE curled up from Braun's cigarette to join the dense layers near the bar's ceiling. Light shone through the blued stratifications in blurred blobs as through fog.

"That's the story," said Braun huskily.

"Not all of it," somebody murmured.

"Not quite. The ship was mostly automatic. I knew then why I had been picked. As I said, in an emergency, I could handle any job or even all jobs, for as long as necessary. We had all the flight tapes from the long voyage out. Mainly it was a job for the computers. You couldn't just run the tapes through backward because nothing ever stands quite still in the universe. All I know is that we did it, the ship and I. The *Venture IV* is the real hero, I guess. It brought me back."

"What about the others?" somebody persisted.

"I don't know," Braun answered irritably. "All I know is what I've told you. What happened to me. About the rest of the bunch, even the experts are still guessing. There are several theories. There were things about the ship. Odd differences. Nothing I could catch, but the experts found curiosities. They think I was tricked, that it's not really the same ship, but a clever

and almost miraculous duplicate."

"But why, and how?"

Braun laughed bitterly. "Your guess is as good as anybody's. Mine is — that I wasn't wanted. The rest of the crew were all specialists, trained technicians, each one the best in his field. If *somebody* out there wanted some samples of the best brains in the human race, he really got the top quality. They were all educated to the hilt, trained for a particular job. Maybe they were picked because they were ready for something else. They had the entrance qualifications. I hadn't. That may not be the only explanation. It's probably the best one."

Braun poured himself another drink and drank it. His eyes stared blankly, as if the essential part of him was back out on the raw frontiers of the dark unknown.

Somebody dragged him back to the bar with a final question.

"But surely you must have some ideas of your own. What do you think happened to the others?"

Braun smiled soberly. His voice was tired, and it sounded as empty as those black spaces where no sun ever shines.

"What I think doesn't matter. There may be another world out there . . . or something in hyperspace. That may be a point of contact, or it may be a barrier a-

gainst all man's dreams of further expansion and exploration into the unknown. You've asked what I think happened to the others, and it's a good question. People are going to keep asking me that. I don't know the true answer. Maybe I'll never know—"

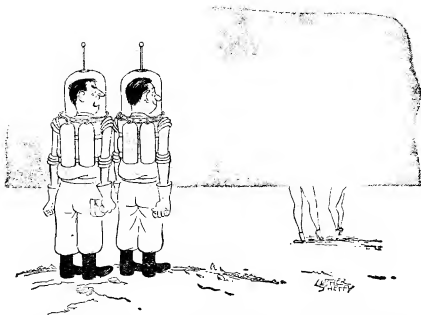
Braun hesitated, glanced round him at the ring of strained and questioning faces. He saw the disbelief registered on them—the thinly veiled anger that seemed to shout

out at him *why don't you tell us what really happened! Tell us the truth!*

Braun sighed resignedly. It was always the same. It would always be the same. Wherever he went. And he would have to keep moving . . . alone, apart from other men.

He walked past the silent questioning faces and through the door. And down the street to the next bar . . .

THE END



"Dammit, the Captain says we have to blastoff as soon as the fog lifts!"

ALBATROSS

by

Mack Reynolds

Far North outposts spotted the unidentified ship and flashed the word to Washington. Military men pondered the situation and decided there was one chance for us — intercept — and question later!

WE were in a hurry to be airborne but I couldn't allow that to keep me from the care that meant the difference between getting back to where we started or blowing the ultra-hot F4IOB we were flying. While Jack Casey climbed into the ship I hustled around it checking to make sure the fuel caps were all on and to pull the safety pin from the nose wheel so it would steer. Then I climbed in too and pulled the pin out of the ejector; if you forgot that you didn't get out of an F4IOB in a bail-out. You usually didn't get out anyway, not without a broken neck—the 410 is *really* fast.

The ground crew had wheeled up an electric starting unit and now they plugged it in, their hands fumbling in their haste. I checked

the dozen warning lights on the instrument panel.

And now, automatically, I went over the procedure that was second nature to me. I began checking in one corner of the cockpit and went around it, missing nothing. The rudder pedals for correct length, the stabilizer and the aileron tabs, the cooling rheostats and the cabin pressurization—we flew at altitudes that called for oxygen at all times.

An enlisted man came running up, breathless. He came to the side of the cockpit and put one hand up, resting against the ship.

I said, "What is it, Corporal?"

"The Colonel," he puffed. "The Colonel says to tell you they're in Saskatchewan already. They left . . . they left all them jets behind, Lieutenant."



Air whistled out from between Jack Casey's teeth. He had been checking his guns behind me.

The corporal took a deep breath and got out the rest of his message. "The Colonel says it looks like they're heading for Chicago, Lieutenant. He says your 410 is the only thing maybe fast enough be-

tween them and Chicago."

The master sergeant in charge of the ground crew had been listening. Now his lips went thin white. Without inflection he said, "Sir, I got a sister in Chicago."

I looked at him. "I have a wife and two children in Chicago, Sergeant."

His eyes went down. "Yes, sir."
"Let's fire up this airplane," I said.

He acknowledged and I flicked on the engine master switch and engaged the starter. When the engine was turning over at approximately five per cent rpm, I opened the throttle part way and the engine picked up to twenty per cent of its own accord.

I waved to the sergeant. "Take it away."

They disconnected the starter unit and began to wheel it off.

I said over my shoulder, "All set, gunner?"

"All set," Casey said. He'd heard the corporal. Casey's mother lived in Gary. His voice was flat, not like Jack Casey's voice.

I closed the dive brakes to the fuselage and dropped my flaps to the take-off setting. The crew pulled the chocks and I made my way to the take-off point. The thing was to get into the air as soon as possible now. When the F4IOB was turning over at anything below ten thousand feet, the fuel consumption was unbelievable.

The call to the tower for clearance was only routine, the whole installation was watching my take-off. I ran the engine up to one hundred per cent power, checked the auxiliary fuel pump and the oil pressure gauge and started down the runway at a clip.

As soon as we broke ground, I snapped the gear up; the indicator lights went out, so I knew it was safely locked. I hit the flap lever and spilled the added lift and the 410 shot forward. I reached for the higher altitudes immediately and headed north, flying easily at about eight hundred. Until I had a better fix on them there was no use using my speed.

The fix improved as we went. The initial surprise over, the boys on ground were doing a better job of tracking. We were getting nearer to an interception point.

I flew easily, my right hand, or rather the fingers of my right hand, resting on the stick, my left hand forward on the throttle. And unceasingly, as I flew, my head moved from one side to another; to the right of the ship, to the left, up, then down, behind me. Mechanically, slowly, covering the sky, the earth, high above, far below, though I doubted that they would be flying much higher than my sixty-odd thousand feet.

Jack Casey and I were the only thing that counted between them and Chicago. Between them and Muriel and Kenny and Bob, and Jack's mother—and the sergeant's sister.

JACK spotted them first, a tiny dot coming in from the north. "Five o'clock high," he said.

I reached for altitude. They had about five thousand feet on me. My fingers touched here and there around the cockpit, charging the guns, twisting the rheostat for the electric sight image in the wind-shield. I set the wingspan pointers to 100 feet for the present. I turned the trigger button from "safe" over to "fire" and opened the throttle slightly.

I brought the Colonel in on the radio, gave him the story. He wanted to know what the hell they were flying that was so fast.

"Some kind of flying wing," I told him "Maybe rocket propelled."

"Don't be silly," he growled. "With that kind of range?"

"Yes, sir," I said. Where did he think they were getting that kind of speed?

The Colonel said, "Okay, Shirey, bring her down."

I said, "Yes sir," and flicked off the set. I didn't want him or anybody else jabbering in my ear now.

* * * *

The craft had become melted and twisted wreckage in only a few moments. We picked over and examined the few items that we'd managed to rescue or that were left in the ruins, avoiding looking at the charred body. Jack Casey took up a spool of wire from among the things we'd tossed out into the long narrow field we'd landed in and fingered it.

He said. "Allen, this looks like the kind of wire used for recordings."

I grunted, looking at the other stuff. "I wonder why they were heading for Chicago," I muttered. "And why did they have to come in over the pole like that?"

Jack shrugged his chunky shoulders. "What difference would it have made if they'd come in from some other direction? Results would have been the same; and not only in this country either."

I went back to the F4IOB and got Colonel Heddrick on the radio. We'd skidded the ship in, ruining the landing gear and crumpling one wing, but it had been important to get down quick.

His voice was jumpy with excitement. "Shirey," he barked, "we'll need proof of this attempted sneak attack to place before the U. N. Have you got any evidence of its origin, its nationality?"

"Yes, sir," I said quietly. "Their ship burned, almost completely destroyed, but we rescued enough of it to indicate origin."

"Excellent," he rapped. "You boys'll get the air medal for this. I'll send some windmills to pick up the material and to get you out of there." He added, almost as an afterthought, "Of course, they came from—"

"No, sir," I interrupted. "They're extra-terrestrial, Colonel. It was a

spaceship, not a fast bomber like we thought."

"What!" he bellowed.

"We've just shot down the first visitors from space," I told him.

LONG hours later we stood before Major General McCord's desk fagged from the flight and even more from the endless questions we'd been having fired at us ever since the return to base. We were too tired to see it that way, but there was an element of humor in the situation.

Over and over the implication had been that we were either drunk or insane. And always our ultimate answer to that suspicion was to motion to the charred body of the three foot alien from space, now packed in dry ice.

General McCord was trying to speak quietly and easily but he was holding himself in restraint with effort. Restraint wasn't one of the general's strong points.

"You claim that this craft looked strange from the first," he rasped. "Why'd you have to be so confounded trigger happy?"

He knew the answer, even better than Casey and I. The orders we were following out came directly from the Pentagon.

I couldn't keep an edge of irritation from my voice.

"Sir," I told him. "All we knew was that the alarm rang and that

we were to get into the air as quick as possible. She was coming in high and fast. Radar first picked her up over the Aleutians; Dutch Harbor reported she was doing fifteen hundred. She left the jets based up in Alaska so far behind that they looked like trainers. Our F4IOBs were the only thing between her and the Chicago-Detroit area; finally it narrowed down to *our* F4IOB being the only thing. Lieutenant Casey and I picked her up in Manitoba, maybe a hundred miles north of Winnipeg. We didn't have time to type her, we didn't have time to challenge her, we didn't even have time to think. Sir, we were the only thing standing between what seemed to be a sneak attack on the country's industrial centers. Our orders were to bring her down and we did."

The general glowered at me. "Did she show any signs of hostility?"

"We didn't give her time to, sir. She was faster than we were. We had just one chance for a crack at her, and then she was going to be gone. We let her have everything we had—everything."

His face worked but he dropped the point. He poked with his finger at the coil of wire on his desk and turned to Jack Casey. "Lieutenant, you said something to the effect that you believed this was a recording somewhat similar to our wire

recordings."

"Yes, sir," Casey said. "I was . . ."

"What gave you that impression?" the general interrupted.

"I was just about to tell you, sir," Casey said, his voice registering complaint. We were both reaching the point of exhaustion where not even a Major General was impressive. "When I first forced my way into the spaceship—it was burning plenty, already—it was there with half a dozen other coils and with a machine that looked something like a phonograph. You know sir, loudspeaker and so forth."

The general said, "Why didn't you rescue the other coils and the machine?"

I protested at that, indicating the bandages that covered the burns we'd both received. "Sir, it was all we could do to recover the odds and ends that we did. The craft was in flames before we were able to land and get to it."

He grunted, "I suppose so," his tone suggesting that we should have shot it down without setting fire to it. He turned to Colonel Heddrick. "Colonel, make arrangements to check completely on this wire and see whether or not it is possible to play it back. That is, of course, if it is a recording."

The general ran a hand over his throat, as though checking to see whether or not he needed a shave.

The matter was affecting him as it had all the rest of us. We felt, well . . . confused.

He said to Casey and me, "I'm making arrangements to send you two back to Washington. They're anxious to get to the bottom of this." He grimaced. "And it's one problem they're welcome to." He poked the wire coil again, thoughtfully. "You might as well wait until we can check this. It might be best to take it to Washington with you. If it's a recording maybe some of those bright boys in Intelligence can decipher it."

JACK Casey and I got less than two hours sleep that night. Early dawn saw us back in the general's quarters, bleary eyed and only half awake. Colonel Heddrick was there and half a dozen other colonels and brigadiers.

The general didn't waste time on preliminaries. He snapped to Jack Casey, "You were right about the wire recording." He motioned with a thumb to an improvised machine on his desk. We're rushing you to Washington where you're to report to a special meeting of . . . well, of the representatives of the six leading powers. But first I want you to hear this."

Casey said, "What good would that do, sir? We don't understand their language any more than. . ."

General McCord silenced him

with a flick of his hand. "The recording is in English. Evidently this life form from space has been picking up our radio emanations and has been able to decipher at least one of our Earth languages. We've decided that the rolls you reported having seen were all meant to be used in initial communication with us." He added in a growl, "Unfortunately, you recovered only one."

The general pressed a switch.

The words came out slowly and clear and with a distinctly mechanical effect, as though they had been created by a speaking machine rather than a human throat.

Greetings . . . to . . . man! We . . . of . . . the . . . Galactic . . . Union . . . welcome . . . this . . . opportunity . . . to . . . make . . . contact . . . with . . . you . . . of . . . Earth.

For . . . many . . . decals . . . we . . . have . . . watched . . . from . . . afar . . . the . . . progress . . . of your . . . race. Now . . . we . . . feel . . . it . . . is . . . time . . . for us . . . to . . . make . . . known . . . our . . . presence . . . and . . . to . . . offer . . . you . . . the . . . benefit . . . of . . . our . . . older . . . civilization. The . . . many . . . problems . . . that . . . confront . . . you . . . today . . . were . . . once . . . our . . . own . . . problems. Fortunately . . . we . . . were . . . able . . . to . . . solve . . . them . . . and . . . institute

. . . a . . . millennia . . . of . . . peace . . . prosperity . . . and . . . good . . . will.

Listen . . . then . . . with . . . care . . . to . . . the . . . advice . . . that . . . follows . . . on . . . the . . . wire . . . coils . . . for . . . in . . . these . . . instructions . . . lie . . . the . . . salvation . . . of . . . your . . . race . . . otherwise . . . fated . . . to perish . . . by . . . its . . . own . . . hand.

That was all. The machine whined and Colonel Heddrick stepped forward and flicked it off. His face was gaunt. It had been Heddrick who had ordered the actual attack.

There was a long silence in the room.

Finally the general said, "You'll start for Washington at once."

I suppose that I could describe our next three months in Washington, New York, London, Paris and Moscow. The endless conferences, the endless sessions with military and political leaders. Somehow, I haven't the heart for it.

When it was all over, Jack Casey and I returned to our base in Montana. They'd commissioned us captains by this time. I don't know why. In all that period in every country we touched, I hadn't met one person who approved of what we'd done. Of course, the blame wasn't put on our shoulders, as individuals.

We both tried to wipe the memory of it from our minds. I said, *we tried*. Jack Casey was no longer the exuberant kid he'd been before, and I spent long hours in the sack, just staring up at the ceiling.

One day we sat in the officer's mess across a chess table, with two or three of the others watching. Jack Casey had made his inevitable gambit, and, also inevitably, I'd accepted. Now he had his king's pawn in his hand.

After a time, when he didn't make his move, I looked up into his face. He was staring at something beyond us.

He said softly, "We shot the Albatross."

"Uh?" I said. The others in the room looked at him. You'd think that his voice wouldn't have carried that well, but everybody was looking at him. There didn't seem to be any particular reason.

He turned his eyes to me. "You remember—that poem about the Ancient Mariner. The Albatross was always the bird of good omen; the sailors used to believe it brought good fortune, good weather, peace and well being."

It didn't sound like the old Casey talking.

He put the pawn back on the board haphazardly and went over to the bookshelf and poked around in it for a minute. The room was still quiet, everybody still watching

him. He returned with the only poetry anthology our little library boasts. He flipped the pages, found what he wanted.

"Yeah, here it is," he said. He read softly, so low I could hardly hear him.

*"At length did cross an Albatross,
Through the fog it came; . . .
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.
'God save thee, ancient mariner,
From the fiends, that plague
thee thus!—
Why lookest thou so?' 'With
my crossbow
I shot the Albatross.'"*

He closed the book and tossed it to the table.

"Yeah, That's it, all right," he murmured. "We shot the Albatross. They sent us ambassadors of peace and good will, this Galactic Union. And what did we do?"

"We killed them," I answered him."

The room had been silent from Jack Casey's first words. Now one of the other pilots said, "Any other nation would have done the same thing."

I said quietly, "That makes it only the worse; that makes all of humanity equally guilty."

Someone else put in, softly, "The question now is what will this Gal-

actic Union do when they learn we . . . shot the Albatross they sent us?"

A voice near the door barked, "Attention!" and General McCord and Colonel Heddrick entered. We scrambled to our feet.

Their faces were wan.

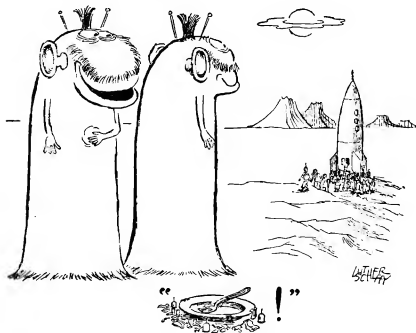
The general didn't waste time. "Our radar, which you know has been trained on space for the past eight weeks, as has every other radar set on Earth, has picked up six spaceships approaching us. It is expected that they will enter Earth's

atmosphere in the region of the poles, as previously. You gentlemen will take off immediately to . . ." he hesitated for a long moment, then finished lamely, " . . . to meet them."

Somebody said, voicing the electric shock which had gone through the room, "You mean intercept them, sir? Are we to assume they're hostile?"

The general rubbed a hand over mouth and chin, checking his shave. "We don't know . . . as yet."

THE END



★ *Fourier Analysis* ★

NO subject contains more *curiosa* than mathematics. But novelty and oddity in mathematics generally turn out to be very practical. That's the way it's been all through the history of the art.

Consider Fourier Analysis. This impressive name covers a technique so useful in applied science that today engineering, particularly electrical and electronic, couldn't get along without it. If you take a pencil and draw a curve of any shape and of some definite period (meaning "having a certain frequency"), this arbitrarily-shaped figure will be capable of being represented to an excellent approximation by a series of sines and cosine—a Fourier series.

This astonishing fact enables radar and television people to analyze the weird figures generated by a cathode ray tube. It enables engineers to compute what will happen when an automobile is subjected to a road test, how parts of it will behave under shock and vi-

bration. It enables airplanes to be built according to designers' whims with the knowledge that the plane will perform closely to the design specifications. In general, Fourier series are of the utmost utility.

Perhaps what is most odd about this mathematical oddity is the fact that the series were devised by the French engineer Fourier with utility in mind. This is unusual in mathematics. Most of the mathematics exists long before the engineer has an applicable problem which might use the mathematics. Fourier devised the mathematics to solve the engineering problems. This happens, but usually only occasionally.

Heaviside's Operational Calculus arose in this way and it was a long time before the mathematician succeeded in giving it rigorous justification. Engineers were building airplanes with its aid before the mathematicians conceded its validity.

Strange are the ways of science!

DON'T MISS OUR COMPANION MAGAZINE IMAGINATIVE TALES

May Issue Featuring Two Great New Science Fiction Novels—

THE MIRACLE OF RONALD WEEMS by ROBERT BLOCH

and

OVER THE RIVER . . . by DANIEL F. GALOUBE

— ON SALE MARCH 6TH AT YOUR NEWSDEALER —



Conducted by Mari Wolf

RECENTLY I attended the twentieth anniversary meeting of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society. Twenty years—it wouldn't be a very long time in the life of a lot of organizations, less than one generation, really. But in science fiction, it is a long time. Twenty years takes you well back toward the beginnings of the modern science fiction field as we know it.

Twenty years ago rockets were Buck Rogerish affairs to most people, and stories about them and the people who traveled in them were limited, very sensibly according to that day's technology, to the twenty-fifth century. (The comic strip of those days, and the movies of a little later, usually showed the rocket coming in for a landing hydroplane fashion, on its belly, side, back, or what would you. . .)

Twenty years ago there were already two science fiction magazines. If you pick up one of their early issues today you'll be struck by how old-fashioned almost everything in it seems. Aside from the reprints of stories by the co-fathers of science fiction, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, most of the stories seem, to us today, utterly lacking in characterization and fine points of plot. The science was laid on in heavy doses; as for the rest, the strangeness of the idea, the very concept of time travel or life on other worlds was enough to carry the story.

What other form of literature has changed so much in one generation? (I got hold of a 1920-something confessions pulp recently; it might, with a few minor changes, such as the striking out of references to flappers and raccoon coats, have been written yes-

terday.)

The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, or LASFS, spans the last twenty years. I believe that its claim to be the oldest of the continuously operated clubs is correct, (although the Philadelphia Science Fiction Club also puts in a claim for longevity honors). During the twenty years of its existence the membership has changed again and again, with a few hard core members from the original days still very much in evidence. As witness Mr. Science Fiction himself, Forry Ackerman. The Society has had its plush days and its lean ones, its times of feuding and dissension and times when everyone got along just fine and other times when membership fell way off and things were dull. At present it's more or less in the last named stage; the regular meetings aren't well attended; there's no fanzine being put out; other clubs in the Los Angeles area are much more active and attract the new entrants to the fan field.

But on the night of the twentieth anniversary party just about everyone was there.

LASFS has given many professional writers and artists to the stf field, headed undoubtedly by ex-fan Ray Bradbury, who, at meetings like the anniversary one, is subjected to hearing all his youthful exploits and fannish fun recapitulated at greath length.

The early days of LASFS, previous to World War II, seem, in the retrospect of the tellers, to be a sort of Golden Age. I wish I'd been around the club then, when

science fiction magazines were few and the money to buy them hard to come by, when fans felt themselves really a race apart, slightly superior, of course, to the normal run of humanity who persisted in being blind to the possibility of rockets, space travel, and intelligent aliens.

Fans come and go. Every year many of them enter fandom eager-eyed, ready for their attempt at a story or an article or a session with a recalcitrant mimeo. Every year many leave the field, perhaps to become professional writers or artists, perhaps having lost interest altogether in science fiction. Or, more usually, just having acquired so many other interests that their interest in stf and fandom sinks back to the passive level. Yet, despite the turnover of individual fans, the fancubs remain. The continuity may be hard to see. The club turns out no product that remains the same or similar year after year. Its intellectual environment may change; its goals may change; it may contain this year totally different types of individuals than it did last year. It seldom maintains the same fanzine for long; often the fanzine editor moves away or just plain leaves the club and takes his zine with him, and someone else starts another, and often a radically different one. Yet most long established clubs have tradition, of a sort. Most fans are aware of the history of fandom, brief as it is, and aware of what has been accomplished by other fans.

Many fancubs start and run for a while and then perish. LAS

FS has kept going because of its hard core of members who'll stick it out during the dry spells and form a nucleus for the next surge of activity. I only hope the activity is always forthcoming and there'll be a thirtieth anniversary.

Many, many clubs keep on and on long after the original members are almost forgotten and Fandom grows all the time. There are wide opportunities for new fans. They can repeat with impunity all the mistakes of all their predecessors, run into trouble with their first attack on a mimeo or their first short story. They can go as far up the ladder to success in the small but hyper-critical world of fandom as their talent and willingness to work will take them. But, I think, if you're a new fan with the whole world of fandom waiting for you to grab it by the tail, it would be well to remember you're not the first. Fandom has a history; short as it is; you can learn a lot from it.

Now to this month's fanzines:

* * *

INSIDE & SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER: 25c or 5/\$1.00. Ron Smith, 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. The appearance of this issue marks the end of an era — and we may hope, the beginning of a new one as bright. The *Science Fiction Advertiser* and *Inside* have merged under the latter's editor and the old SFA is now a thing of the past. (The new magazine is being sent, for the first issue at least, from SFA's mailing address.)

The combined zine is a very good looking one — photo-offset

as were its erstwhile components, with a full quota of advertising. SFA was always primarily an advertising medium, but it carried some of the best literary criticisms of any zine. Now, the slant seems to lean more to *Inside*; there's fiction, for one thing, with promises of more.

The stories in this issue, by Robert Gilbert, David Bunch, and Don Howard Donnell, are about the past, present, and future respectively; they are tied together under the heading "Evolution" but have little thematic connection. Individually fine examples of amateur fiction, though.

Alan Hunter reports on "Science Fiction in England," describing the state of the British market and the magazines being published.

Chad Oliver asks—and answers — the perennial question, "What Is Science Fiction?" I suggest you read the article for yourself, as it gives a good picture of what stf is, and isn't. Of course, Chad's definition may not be yours. I'll go along with him though, where he sums up his stand in a few sentences:

"First of all, it (science fiction) is the inevitable response in literature to the technological revolutions of our time. It is the philosophy of a new era, and no more to be wondered at than knightly sagas in the age of chivalry or cowboy tales in the days of the expanding frontier. Secondly, science fiction is a writing technique — a way of telling a story."

Chad highlights a fine first issue of this new combination.

Rating: 2

* * *

EISFA: 5c; monthly; Mr. and Mrs. Robert Coulson, 626 Court St., Huntington, Indiana. Buck and Juanita Coulson don't let anything stop them from turning this zine out on schedule for the Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association. A good many of the stencils were typed while the Coulsons were in the process of moving — but don't ask me how you manage to type while riding along in an automobile . . . Reproduction is a bit below EISFA's average (bumpy road?).

There's a rather broad satirical attempt, credited to Roski Ilyanovitch, "Little Ivan's Adventures on the Moon." There are also a couple of stories about the Third World War, neither particularly new, and a note on the 1955 World Science Fiction Convention in Cleveland. (And by all means plan to attend if you're in the area.)

But to me much the best part of this fanzine was Ross Allen's "Why is a Classic?" Allen speaks out against the growing habit of referring to an stf story as a classic just because it was written 30 years ago. There was many a bad story then — and not very many good ones, by today's standards.

Rating: 4

* * *

NUCLEONICS: no price listed; monthly; L. S. Bourne, 370 S. E. Hawthorne, Portland, Ore. L. S. Bourne edits it; Dick Geis publishes it. Naturally, it's dittoed, a la *Psychotic*. But it's not quite as good looking a ditto job — though still way above average. It must have been typed on a different type-

writer . . .

Nucleonics is a rather slim (13 page) fanzine, containing a rambling editorial, an autobiographical sketch by Don Day, a couple of amusing "Little Willy" poems, several pages of art work (not so good) and a couple of stories. Ruth Allison's "Suicide" is written in the second person — this choice of person being its most original feature. (Why do so many writers, fan and pro, think that if the hero can only present his own decaying or suicidal society with the evidence that an earlier, similar society perished, that his own culture will immediately reform itself? When has it ever happened? Or even almost happened?)

Rating: 6

*

FANTASTIC WORLDS: 30c; quarterly; S. J. Sackett, 411 W. 6th St., Hays, Kansas. It's hard to rate this one. Unless you're violently opposed to all amateur fiction you'll like the stories here. (Some of them I'm sure would have found a market professionally.) The art work is good, with some of it very good indeed. The photo offset reproduction is excellent; in fact the only thing wrong with this zine from a visual standpoint is its lack of justified margins. A surprising omission, considering the amount of care the staff has put into turning out a fine magazine

But the price is high.

In this issue Clive Jackson's story "Susan" is an elaboration on an old theme, but an extremely vivid one, and one in which the characters come alive. I'm sure it

would have been salable.

Raymond Shafer's "The Winners," though well written, seems to me to suffer from certain inherent weaknesses in psychology. Some of the things that bothered his characters just wouldn't have disturbed them — given their history and environment.

Sackett presents "Fielding: Writer of Fantasy," valuable for all those interested in the history of the fantasy story. And A. Bert-ram Chandler gives us a poem, "Admonition," which is apropos indeed.

Rating: 3

* * *

SATELLITE: Don Allen, 3, Arkle St., Gateshead 8, Co. Durham, England. English price for this one is 1- per copy; no American rates are listed. I imagine though that you could swap an American science fiction magazine or pocket-book for a copy.

Don Allen is a member of Nez Fez, of the North-East Science Fantasy Society, apparently quite an active group in northern England. The issue I have here has only fair reproduction; apparently it was plagued by all sorts of troubles including the breaking down of the mimeo.

L. S. Blackie in "Ritten or Written" discusses what it takes to write a good science fiction story (or any other kind of story, for that matter). I don't think I agree with him on the value of writing schools; some may be very helpful, but a lot give out assignments by rote, with very little *personal* criticism. Getting individual assistance and comment from an

established writer or editor is one thing; filling out mimeographed assignment sheet No. 15 is another . . .

There are extensive letter and fanzine review sections. Also, an article for the femme fan by Joan Burps, "Clothes and the Future." But I'm sure they won't be as transparent as the dress in the illo!

Rating: 6

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c or 3 for 25c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. Under the title on the front cover this issue there's the notation "Est. 1946." Quite a long time for a zine like this one, so specialized in its aims and audience. There have been times when the *Trader* has carried other features besides its advertised lists of stf-fantasy material wanted or for sale. This issue, in fact, carries Roy Dixon's "STF Stuff," a column reviewing stories in back issues of science fiction magazines, as well as a few current ones.

But in main the *Trader* has always been put out for the collector—the science fiction fan who is looking for back issues of magazines or old, hard to get books, and the fan who has back material for sale.

There is many a good buy here. And if you have stf for sale, ad rates are low here too.

Rating: 3

* * *

BREVZINE: 15c; bimonthly; Warren A. Freiberg, 5369 W. 89th St., Oak Lawn, Ill. *Brevzine* is as pre-tentious as ever, with the new ad-

dition of a rather poor mimeo job. You'd think to look at the cover and the contents page that this was a professional magazine and not a fanzine; publisher Freiberg is listed as Chairman of the Board (of the W. A. Freiberg Company.) Oh, yes, Erwin Hughmont is the actual editor of this zine, with a large staff of managing, assistant and art editors, and other Members of the Board!

Fiction this time is by Dennis Murphy, Elmer R. Kirk, and Howard Burton. Murphy's "The Waiting House" is long by fanzine standards: ten pages, single-spaced. Weird. Kirk's is weird too, with a sort of time paradox ending.

But something's changed for the better. Of three stories, only Burton's has the once inevitable blurb telling you how good it is.

Rating: 8

* * *

EPITOME: 10c; Mike May, 9428 Hobart St., Dallas 18, Texas. It's changed from a multi-color production to a mere conservative mimeo job of black ink on green paper. Reproduction is quite good, especially for a second issue.

There's a report by Boob (sic) Stewart on "The SF Con," giving yet another view of the San Francisco affair. It seems that just about everyone who went saw different aspects of it — or at least went to different parties.

There's a fanzine review section, in which the editor has nice things to say about quite a few other fanzines. A welcome change from many review sections, where personalities enter in more than the

quality of material under consideration . . .

Also there's a story by Don Donnell, and Ted White's account of the early days of *Zip*.

Rating: 6

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; published twice a month; Fandom House, P. O. Box No. 2331, Paterson 23, New Jersey. Edited and published by James V. Taurasi and Ray Van Houten. F-T seems back on its old footing once more, no longer the slim and often weeks late version of its original self that it was for a while. Though it fell behind its schedule it never missed an issue — and what other amateur magazine, after 13 years of continuous publication, could say the same?

F-T still brings you the news of the fantasy-science fiction world, professional and fan. You'll find everything here from Convention reports to fan meetings all over the world to reviews of new books to notices of who's taken over the editorship of what magazine.

It's very good to have on hand if you want to keep up to date on things science-fictional.

Rating: 3

* *

MINI: 10c or 3 for 25c; Jacob Edwards, 1010 N. Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, Va. Perhaps it's not fair to be too critical with a new zine (this is No. 1) but, after all, this is supposed to be a review and all I know about a fanzine is what I can see reading it.

To start with, this is a very thin zine for a dime. Actually only 14 half size pages. The art

work is so-so; the mimeoing is sometimes clear and sometimes very poor.

There is a column by Ted White that contains only one good line . . . by Bob Bloch, "It's a small world, and I have claustrophobia." Jerald Lowry has a very old time travel story and, after that, are some fanzine reviews by the editor. The editor, Jacob Edwards, has a rather egotistical editorial; he seems determined to start as a BNF. Oh, well, someone will slap him down.

Rating: 8

* * *

COUP: bimonthly; 14 Jones St., New York City, N. Y. The price listed for this new zine is \$1.50 a year, which would work out to a quarter per copy.

This one is devoted to Fanarchy and is opposed to people being sheep. If you want to get into a political, sociological, or science-fictional argument, you can undoubtedly find antagonists here. Only one query . . . Why, if you are supposed to be un-sheeplike in proclaiming your opinions, do the editors sign themselves merely *The Editors*?

Writing level here is fairly high; the zine definitely has its own distinctive flavor (a pinch of wormwood, perhaps). I enjoyed reading it, but I didn't agree at all. Guess I'm no Fanarchist at heart. To me, a soapbox makes a poor typewriter stand.

The article on the Great Comic Book investigation is interesting, and if you're a MAD fan you'll probably want to read it. (Plenty of MAD fans around this zine, ap-

parently.) Then there's a movie review blasting some recent pictures and the trend in male stars—seems to me we've had "peach-fuzzed boys with knotless legs" around as long as there's been a Hollywood. Maybe they just show up better on a wide screen.

Rating: 5

IMAGINE THAT! 10c; Ray Youstra Jr., 10441 Central Park, Chicago 43, Ill. Another new fanzine, dittoed, by Ray Youstra and Ed Knowlton. One of the columns in it, Dick McDaniel's "The Sideline" is dedicated to the wishes and wants of the teen-age science fiction reader. If you're in your teens you might like to get in touch with this zine—you'll find other young fans with similar interests.

This fanzine could be put out a lot more cheaply. Double spacing requires a double amount of paper; so, obviously, does using only one side of the paper. The editors could easily arrange their material so as to cut their postage considerably, or else include a lot more material for the same postage rate.

Bob Lindon writes a story about a haunted house. Ray Youstra has one about the "Last Martian." Both pretty stock. Then there's a brief debate between the editors on the question of US or UN control of an artificial satellite.

Rating: 7

* * *

THE GALACTIC HERALD: 15c; John W. Murdock, 619 E. 8th St., Apt. N, Kansas City 6, Mo. This zine is another one that tries to look like a professional magazine in format. It had a slick paper cov-

er (cover art not so slick though) with a listing of stories and their authors under the cover illustration. The contents page is also set up like a prozine's.

This is a fanzine with a rather hybrid character. It is primarily a fiction zine. The fiction isn't really good; it runs to the sort of story so many beginning writers turn out. It's not bad compared to a lot of fanzine fiction, though, but it rather substantiates the claim that most fan nonfiction is better than most fan fiction.

Of the three stories in this issue, Joseph Gilbert's "The Dark

Land" was considerably the best.

The only fannish thing about this zine is its choice of pennames. El Torro and Polly Chrome . . . wow. (If "Torro" means "Bull" it has one *r* too many.) For the rest, you might best call it a zine of definitely amateur fantasy fiction.

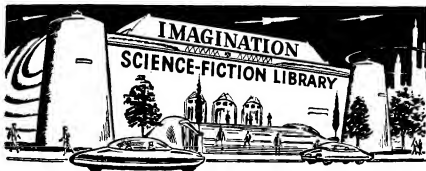
Rating: 7

Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed send it to me, Mari Wolf, Fandora's Box, IMAGINATION, P O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. See you next month . . .

—Mari Wolf



"Dear Mr. Colt . . ."



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

ONE IN THREE HUNDRED

by J. T. McIntosh, 223 pages, \$2.95, Doubleday & Co., Inc. Garden City, New York.

This book takes its title from the first of three separate but related stories. The other two are "One In a Thousand" and "One Too Many."

Expect no novelty here. This plot is familiar. The Sun is becoming a modified nova. Earth will soon be uninhabitable but one in three hundred human beings will have a chance to be transported by hastily built space ships to Mars, whose habitability will be increased both by Nature and by Man.

The first story is concerned with who shall be chosen and how. In a straight forward narrative style the author makes a neat case for choosing "those of good will" though a stinker is bound to slip through.

The second story deals with the trip to Mars and of course the third story treats of settling it.

It's an entertaining book in many respects, but the author makes no pretense of scientific accuracy or validity in handling the problems.

Perhaps this is as it should be because the characterization, while somewhat wooden, is at least an attempt at characterization!

The story is spiced up quite a bit by route of "it's-hot-in-the-spaceship - let's - take - off - our-clothes" routine or "the-climate's-warmed - up - let's - take-off-our-clothes" treatment. It's much as if the author thought to himself, tongue in cheek, "I'll give them a little sparkle here". But really, the story isn't bad. Negative praise perhaps, but that's it.

Letters from the Readers

SOUTHEAST CONFERENCE

Dear Bill:

It is a distinct pleasure to announce that arrangements have been completed for one of science fiction's major events for 1955. The First Annual Southeastern Science Fiction Conference. This affair, the first in the South in many years, will be held April 2 and 3rd at the Dinkler Plaza Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia.

"All Southern readers are invited to attend, as well as those fans from other parts of the country. A bang-up time for all is promised! Included in the program will be a banquet, stf auction, guest speakers, etc. Master of ceremonies will be Wilson Tucker.

Registration cost is simply \$1 which should be sent to Ian Macaulay, Chairman, 57 East Park Lane, Atlanta 5, Ga.

Remember the dates—April 2nd and 3rd! Hope to see *you* there.

Robert A. Madle
Publicity Chairman
1620 Anderson St.

Charlotte, N. C.

Good luck with the Conference, Bob. We'll try and be there—deadlines permitting. How about the rest of you, gang! . . . with

COVER NOT STF?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've just finished the January issue of *Madge*, after haunting the mailbox for weeks waiting for the new issue. Well, needless to say, it finally arrived (on time, actually) and first thing I looked at was the cover. Very, very good—except for one thing; it wasn't science fiction.

Sure, there was the dream car in the lower right hand corner, with the 1990 license plates; and the girl's costume. But the car could have been a Chevy or a Ford, and the license plates 1954—and the girl could have been wearing anything!

Still, it was very good. Even better than *GALAXY*'s. Your new look (pinups-with-a-science-fiction-theme-covers) are really good, and

definitely better than any of the other mags.

Now on to the feature novel, **WORLD OF THE DRONE** by Robert Abernathy. There just aren't any adjectives to explain how I felt after (and while) reading it. Let it suffice to say that it was a terrific and imaginative tale! It may not have been too probable, but it certainly was different. I've certainly never read anything like it.

I hope to see more of Abernathy in future issues!

Don Stuefloten
R. R. 1, Box 722
Hemet, Calif.

In describing the January cover, Don, how would you classify the green-skinned man? Certainly he would have to be an alien! This isn't science fiction? . . . wh

BUM NOVEL . . .

Dear Bill:

Felt that I just had to get my two cents worth in on this space station discussion. It seems that most of those who are participating are talking as if the station is a thing far in the future. Might I point out that the future is upon us, if we realize that it isn't necessary to have a space station to deliver death to any part of the world. The guided missile and rocket program of our own country—and unfortunately also the Russians—is now ready, with a little concerted effort, to “A” or “H” bomb any selected target or targets. In order to have a space station we must have the rockets capable of not only travelling from one

part of the earth to another with pin-point accuracy, but also be able to hit the theoretical point above the Earth and stop, to establish a stable orbit. It boils down to the fact that before we can build a space station we must have a machine or weapon that could in itself control the Earth!

We might as well turn this future space station over to the UN or other type “World Government”, for by the time it is built its usefulness as a weapon will be past. There is no sense in killing mice with an “A” bomb when a mouse trap will work.

The January issue of *Madge* just crossed my desk. (I'm in the Army, and with only 42 days left in service I feel that reading *Madge* is about the limit of constructive work I'll do!) The novel this month, **WORLD OF THE DRONE**, is the worst I have read in twenty issues. I always thought that science fiction was based on the extrapolation of today's science and/or socio-economics to the future or past. Perhaps this definition of stf isn't in agreement with most, or all of the others, but take any other reasonable definition and the lead novel still doesn't fit, being badly written, childish, and lacking in organization. It seems that the author just throws in another gimmick when he becomes trapped in his own labyrinth. I hate to say this, but usually the novels in *Madge* are excellent.

Dave Brunner
755 East 51st St.
Brooklyn 3, N. Y.

The space station is not supposed to be a weapon, Dave, but a step-

ping stone to space itself; the whole discussion arises from the premise that if Russia puts up one first it might be used as a weapon! with

trust you're kidding about the "balloon space station" since the idea is quite ridiculous. Don't know what the Reds will be doing, but they sure as hell won't be blowing up balloons! with

OUR NEW LAURELS

Dear Bill:

Madge's new look in science fiction covers is well taken around here. McCauley's pinups are very eye catching. *Madge* has always had unusual covers, but these new ones are setting her apart from the rest of the field. This seems to disprove my fear that you would sit back and rest on your laurels once *Madge* was firmly established. I hope you'll go right on dreaming up new ideas like this latest one. They help keep *Madge* on top just as much as the stories.

I don't like to pour cold water on all the people in the space station discussion, but the latest informed word is that a space station capable of carrying a crew is not likely to be built for a long time. A space satellite not more than ten feet in diameter may be built within the next few years. It will be released from a balloon and will occupy a temporary orbit before falling back to Earth with the aid of a parachute. The cost will be no more than that of an Air Force high altitude rocket and the results will be tremendous. I wonder what the Russians will do . . .

Peter Eberhard
44 Mountain View Ave.
Pearl River, N. Y.

Glad you like the new look, Pete. Guess most everybody does . . . We

BELL RINGER

Dear Ed:

Just finished reading the January issue of *Madge*. Speaking from a background of having read about all of stf since B.G. (before Gernsback) I think you have arrived—solidly and firmly. Though not a subscriber, I have never missed an issue. However, for the reason given below, I buy them all.

It is my theory that if I get one good story out of an issue I have had my 35c worth. Isn't a good story worth it? I'll even put up with a blank now and then because I usually find from the letter columns that somebody has liked at least one.

But the January issue rang the bell. It was really a good issue!

In regard to the editorial, as to the reason for the popularity of stf, I am inclined to doubt that Mr. Fadiman has given the subject enough thought. Escape fiction, hah! What about the fiction of the slicks, where the hero is invariably a knight with shining briefcase, coming home to a menage described in detail on page 26 of "Better Homes and Gardens" magazine.

Or how about the new (!) school of sadistic (?) writing in which the hero (?) is a sordid little bum doing a number of pointless sordid little things. Pffui.

Compare a 75 year old try at

stf prophecy with modern life. How they fell short!• But where would the world be if it were not for these forward-thinking people? Would we be satisfied with a mere improvement of the status quo of 150 years ago? Or of any other era?

About the space station: this is really a dandy. It is true that the USA has no aspirations for world domination. We have always been a nation of businessmen and we want the world merely to be at peace so economies can run normally. Yet, we are a young country; will we stay the way we are?

As far as a world government is concerned, that would be fine, but so would Utopia. Look at the world news. Every little hole-in-the-wall country is clamoring for autonomy, rather than the reverse, and immediately it begins to flex its muscles, however feeble they may be.

The role that religion should play in bringing and keeping together the peoples of the world was well set out in the Ed Lacey letter. It is the reaction of an honest, decent human being, and there are millions to be found. But bunch them together and they seem to lose these feelings. We all know people whose lives are beautiful because of the force of their religion. But can we say the same of any large group of people (nation)?

At present no honest person will deny that it would be best for the world if the USA controlled the prospective space station, since our motives are peaceful and honorable.

Finally, do you agree that the space station is considerably farther in the future than stf litera-

ture would lead us to believe?

Best of luck from one who reads *IMAGINATION* from no complicated motives. *Madge* is interesting and entertaining, and it looks as though it'll stay that way!

F. W. Zwicky

2244 S. 6th St.

Rockford, Ill.

We don't agree at all that a space station—or for that matter space travel—is considerably in the future. Reports have leaked out of Russia for some time that active work is being done on both problems. That's another reason why this discussion is important: why isn't our country stepping up plans and works similarly! For our dough, that's the \$64 question of the decade wlv

DULL SUBJECT?

Dear Bill:

I have to say here and now that this space station business is getting on my nerves. You insist on dragging this dull topic onward and onward 'til when I hear the word *Madge* I get a pain. What, tell me, is the use of all this blah, blah? No one is going to change their opinion because of a letter read in *Madge*. No one, I doubt, has any desire to hear about it, except the fools who send in the steady flow of long drawn out letters on Space Station No. 1. I skip all the letters for the reason above. I do read the GOOD ones.

Do you realize that anyone who doesn't think the USA should control a space station is holding a gun to his head? I agree with Jack Zeitz that the UN is not quite unit-

ed. As long as Russia has any say in it, or any Red country for that matter, the UN is out! The number one way to destroy peace is to let Russia lay a finger on the matter. If she did it would probably have a mini-bomb ready to drop—I wish somebody would drop a bomb on the space station letters. It might get scrambled into something worth while reading.

George W. Fields
471 S. Fraser Ave.
Los Angeles 22, Cal.

For a dull subject, George, you seemed to have a few words to throw in! Actually, all this blah blah as you call it continues to keep the subject where it belongs—in the public eye. As stated, reports from our national wire services in the past year have indicated Russia is actively working on space travel. And us . . . note letter following for a unique quote from a government official with

"DEFENSE" STATEMENT

Dear Bill:

This argument over space stations is rather foolish. It is obvious—much as we all would like to believe otherwise, that Russia will be the first nation to put the satellite in the sky. As proof, I offer these facts:

Russia (reportedly) is moving ahead with full speed to hang their shingle on a meteor. And, the USA attitude is best summed up by our own Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson, who has stated: "I wouldn't care if the Russians did build a space ship."

So forget your dreaming. America, as usual, is too stupid to see

beyond her nose, and any stf fan who is brave enough to *think* is going to run into the same problem as did Robert Fulton, Billy Mitchell, etc. ad infinitum.

In closing, if all *Madge's* stories were as good as *WORLD OF THE DRONE* in the January issue, I'd be forced to subscribe!

Jeremy Millette
1446 Garden St.
Park Ridge, Ill.

If the quote you gave is exactly what Charles Wilson said, we'd say he's outdone his dog classic! Perhaps he wouldn't care if the Russians got a space ship first, but we damn well would! The future of man will not be written on this planet—it will begin the day space is conquered. The vistas that will thus unfold for mankind will be endless. The only catch is in who gets there first—to determine whether free men will voyage to the stars. Mr. Wilson is obviously a brilliant man; we're inclined to think he meant, "as long as we build one first!" At least, we hope so with

LOOPHOLES, HUH?

Dear Bill:

Well surprise! After all these many years a really readable issue of *Madge*! Will wonders never cease. Don't know how long it's been since I enjoyed *Madge* as much as I did the January issue.

The new look covers are fine. Keep it up. I like to look at pictures of nice looking gals, so keep McCauley busy!

I don't usually care for your novels, but Abernathy's *WORLD OF*

THE DRONE was quite good. BROWN JOHN'S BODY struck me as the best of shorts. Quite an unusual job.

On to the letter section!

Gibson's letter on the space station seemed about the most sensible to me. Maybe we better stop worrying so much about who's gonna run what and concentrate on just getting there! I think the first one will have the say. . .

Inspiration just occurred to me. everybody keeps yapping about a space station. So say we throw one up there and six months later Russia throws one up and a little later along comes England with one. It'll begin to look like a new real estate development! I think I'd vote for at least a half dozen space stations—the more the merrier!

Lacy is right in suggesting "one world" and I agree with him but I don't think there's much chance of it. Russia doesn't seem to be so inclined and we're not doing a red-hot job ourselves.

Sanford brings up a good point and your analogy has loopholes in it. Just because we're better off than the Russians (and let's face it, most of the Russians aren't in concentration camps in Siberia or standing up against walls) do you think we have an ideal society? I've got a cat, Crazy, by name. She has plenty to eat and she lives well. But what would happen if I pitched her out in the street and deprived her of my benevolent protection? Crazy is no alleycat and I don't think she'd last long in alleycat society. Thanks anyway, I'd rather be a hungry seagull than

Sanford's parakeet. At least I wouldn't be in a cage!

Enough of this. Congrats again on a good issue.

Dick Ellington
171 St. Marks Ave.
Brooklyn 38, N. Y.

Who's depriving anyone of benevolent protection? Seems like we've done more than our share of extending the helping hand abroad. And of course we'll continue to do so. Going it alone—your poor seagull—is a thing of the past. But then it's the future we're concerned with. And man's venture into space will really open the future up. Half a dozen space stations? So, ok, let's put it on a competitive basis. The USA's never passed up a business challenge yet! with

ONE FOR MILT

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Since that letter of mine appeared in the December issue I've received a raft of correspondence from over 20 fans; as of now my stationery budget has slightly collapsed!

With the January issue, *Madge* seems to be pulling out of her slump. I sure hope so!

I must remark that I was pleasantly surprised—astonished—to see a pretty good story by Milton Lesser (THE DICTATOR) in the January number. So *maybe* the guy can write afterall!

Paula Friedman
3722 Appleton St., NW
Washington 16, D. C.

Glad to see your faith in Lesser is somewhat restored. Reason being

simply that Milt can write a whole of a good story, and we've got a humdinger on our desk right now to prove it! We'll schedule it as soon as possible, and believe us, it's really good! . . . wh

BAD TASTE?

Dear Bill:

The January issue of *Madge* is a great improvement over previous issues. In fact, the only thing I can find wrong with it is the cover. McCauley usually does good work, but this one seems to be in bad taste.

The novel, *WORLD OF THE DRONE*, was excellent, despite a few stereotypes in it. The short stories, too, were quite good. Even the Milton Lesser yarn. Compared

with his other work for *Madge*, **THE DICTATOR** was excellent!

How long can Luther Scheffy keep up those zany cartoons? Huh?

Dainis Bisenieks

336 S. Warren

Saginaw, Michigan

*Pal, you've really got us perplexed. Where, pray tell, was the January cover in bad taste? The more we look at it the better we like it! . . . Don't worry about Luther Scheffy running out of zany cartoon ideas. The lad's keeping us supplied with a raft of belly laughs. You'll be seeing more soon—every issue. Which about winds up shop for this month, gang. See you next issue, and don't forget to pick up the current issue of our companion book, *IMAGINATIVE TALES* . . . wh*

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How many times have you been talking or thinking about a person — then suddenly he or she appears? You had no reason to expect him (or her). But your mind must know!

Do you ever have the premonition that something is going to happen — then, bingo! — that very thing DOES happen?

Have you ever started to say something at an exact the same instant that someone else started to utter the SAME words?

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Some years ago the noted "father of modern psychology," Will James of Harvard, made the astounding statement that most people use only 10% of their mental powers! The other 90% lies idle. Now, at last, science is making it easy for us to USE that vast reserve of brain power!

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That phrase comes from the Bible. It is just as true today as it was 2,000 years ago! But NOW we know the means to think along the right lines! Now we know how much better we can make our lives by simply releasing and putting to work the tremendous forces which have been lying dormant in our minds!

Of course you'd like to have a better home. A happier fuller life. More understanding, respect and affection from your family, friends and associates. Greater success in your life work. More personal security and peace of mind in this troubled world!

You can have all these things in abundance — soon! Nothing is impossible — nothing is beyond your reach — which you know how to use. The Secret of The Power Within You.

Ben Swetland, known to millions throughout the United States as Radio's Consulting Psychologist, and who has contributed many weeks in the field of applied psychology — quite incidentally discovered the direct contact between the two minds of man — and how one can — at will — call upon his great mental powers.

The general term "I CAN" refers to the mental self. Swetland has taught for years. When this word is added to another, it becomes an instruction to self. "The only difference between the positive and the negative will," this psychologist pointed out in 1933, is that one thinks in terms of "I CAN" and the other — "I CANNOT!" He taught his followers to hold to the thought "I CAN" and in a large number of cases, they proved they could — they did things.

One goal truth was definitely established. The words "I CAN" provided the direct path from the conscious mind to the subconscious mind, the use of which unlocked the power to bring the door to the outer senses.

Many years with a highly sensitive ear, Ben Swetland — and related to a life of single blessedness. "I CAN" helped the confusion of happiness to smile on her. A large circle of friends — and a devoted husband — came into being almost as though a magic wand had been used.

Living Swetland had a good singing voice but lacked the courage to use it in public. "I CAN" gave her direct contact with her source of power and she has since appeared on concert stages throughout the United States.

For Western was a modest man, you might say. In his 70s, when days after passing his "I CAN" conference were started to expand. Today he operates a business employing 30 mechanics.

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TOMORROW'S SCIENCE

BARRED SPIRAL NEBULA IN ERIDANUS: Thirty per cent of Spiral nebula photographed differ from normal pattern in that arms begin at ends of luminous "bar" extending across nucleus. 200 inch telescope photo clearly shows unusual phenomenon.

Another scan
by
cape1736

